

Being in water for labour and birth

The following information answers some commonly asked questions about choosing to get into a warm bath during active labour (water immersion) and giving birth in water (water birth). This information should not replace discussion with your midwife or doctor about your situation and what matters to you. We encourage you to ask questions and take time to consider your options.

What is water immersion and waterbirth?

Water immersion, is when a person gets into a bath or pool of water at any point in their labour, before their baby is born.

A water birth, is where a person stays in the water during the pushing stage of labour and their baby is born underwater. The baby will usually take its first breath after being brought out of the water.

Why labour in water?

Planned water immersion is safe for well women and babies and has lots of benefits¹:

Water can:

- **provide significant pain relief** and you are less likely to use medications, and epidurals^{1 2 3}
- **help you feel more relaxed by**^{1 2}:
 - reducing the production of stress hormones
 - increasing the release of hormones that act as pain relievers
 - giving support and buoyancy so it is easier to move around and change positions

Good for baby and birth

- moving around in labour increases blood flow to your placenta and baby¹
- water can relax pelvic floor muscles which can help with birth²
- encourages skin to skin contact with baby which keeps baby warm and reduces baby's stress levels

Many people find being in water during labour and birth a gentle and positive experience. You can choose:

- how much of your labour you spend in the bath
- to get out of the bath to give birth
- to birth the placenta in or out of the water.

Can anyone choose to labour and birth in water?

Northern NSW maternity services supports the choice of warm water immersion and water birth for well women and their babies. Each of our maternity facilities have rooms with baths for warm water immersion. If you reach 37 weeks of pregnancy, are well and have had no pregnancy complications and you are able to get in and out of the bath without much help, you should be able to labour in water.

There are times when water immersion and water birth are not recommended as safe.

We might recommend you not to get into the water at all, or during labour we might ask you to get out of the water. Some reasons include if:

- There is concern about you. For example if you have high blood pressure, bleeding, a fever or an infection
- There is concern about your baby's wellbeing
- You are having more than one baby (twins)
- Your baby is not positioned head down
- You are before 37 or past 42 weeks pregnant
- You weigh more than 100kg
- We do not have staff trained in waterbirth to support you
- We do not have the right equipment available

Is waterbirth safe for my baby?

The benefits or risks of waterbirth for newborns are not clear. Evidence shows no increase in newborn death or other bad health outcome for babies of low risk women^{1 2 3}. However, there is a chance that:

- Your baby may gasp (breathe) underwater if they experience 'fetal distress' (become stressed from low oxygen). During labour we will keep checking your baby's heartbeat to make sure they are not in distress. If their heartbeat is not normal, we will ask you to get out of the water.

- If your baby breathes in some water (aspirates) they may need some help breathing and may need time to recover in the Special Care Nursery.
- The umbilical cord might snap as the baby is born. If this happens, there is a chance your baby could lose some blood. We will quickly clamp your baby's cord and ask a paediatrician to check your baby. Cord snapping is rare, about 1 in 800 waterbirths. Cord snapping is more common if the water is too deep (over your breasts when sitting) and/or if the baby is brought to the surface too quickly.
- If you collapse in the water it takes us longer to provide medical care to you and baby. This is very rare.

What else should I know about having a water labour or birth?

When can I get in the bath?

If you decide you would like to use water, it is best to wait until contractions are strong and regular before getting in. This usually means having contractions at least every 5 minutes and they last about 1 minute. If you get in too early, the water can be so relaxing that labour slows down.

What temperature is the water?

The temperature of the bath water is very important. While you baby is inside you, they depend on your temperature. When you get too warm, so does your baby. A big rise in your baby's temperature can affect their oxygen supply which may lead to distress.

During the first stage labour

- choose a water temperature so that you are comfortably warm and not hot and flushed.
- We will take your temperature regularly. If your temperature is too high, we will ask you to get out of the bath to cool down. If you want to get back in we will make the water cooler.
- We recommend you drink lots of fluids while you are in the water.

During water birth (pushing stage of labour)

- The water temperature needs to be similar to your body temperature (37–37.5 degrees Celsius). Having the water temperature the same as your body means your baby will make a gentle transition as they are born and are unlikely to take a breath until they are brought to the surface.
- We will check the water temperature every 15 minutes and adjust it as needed.

How deep is the water?

The water in the bath should not be too deep or too shallow. We recommend the bath be filled to the level of the breasts when sitting in the bath. This depth ensures that the baby is:

- born completely underwater
- brought gently to the surface without pulling tightly on the umbilical cord

Working together when planning a waterbirth, do:

- move around and get up and out of the bath regularly to pee.
- keep hydrated by having sips of water or other drinks regularly.
- tell your midwife if the water is too hot or too cold.
- get out of the bath if you feel uncomfortable.
- tell us how you are feeling and if you are worried about anything.
- get out of the bath if we ask you to.

Decision Making

It is always okay to ask questions. **BRAND** is a handy memory prompt for questions you might like to ask.

B	What are the BENEFITS ?
R	What are the RISKS ?
A	What are the ALTERNATIVES ?
N	What if I do NOTHING ?
D	When do I need to DECIDE ?

Where did this information come from?

- 1) Cluett E, Burns E, Cuthbert A. Immersion in water during labour and birth. Cochrane Database Syst Rev2018; 5(5) [Immersion in water during labour and birth - Cluett, ER - 2018 | Cochrane Library](#)
- 2) Carlsson T, Ulfsdottir H. Waterbirth in low-risk pregnancy: An exploration of women's experiences. Journal of Advanced Nursing 2020; 76(5): 1221-31. [Waterbirth in low-risk pregnancy: An exploration of women's experiences - Carlsson - 2020 - Journal of Advanced Nursing - Wiley Online Library](#)
- 3) The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists 2021 Water Immersion during Labour and Birth. Link <https://ranzcog.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Water-immersion-during-labour-and-birth.pdf>

