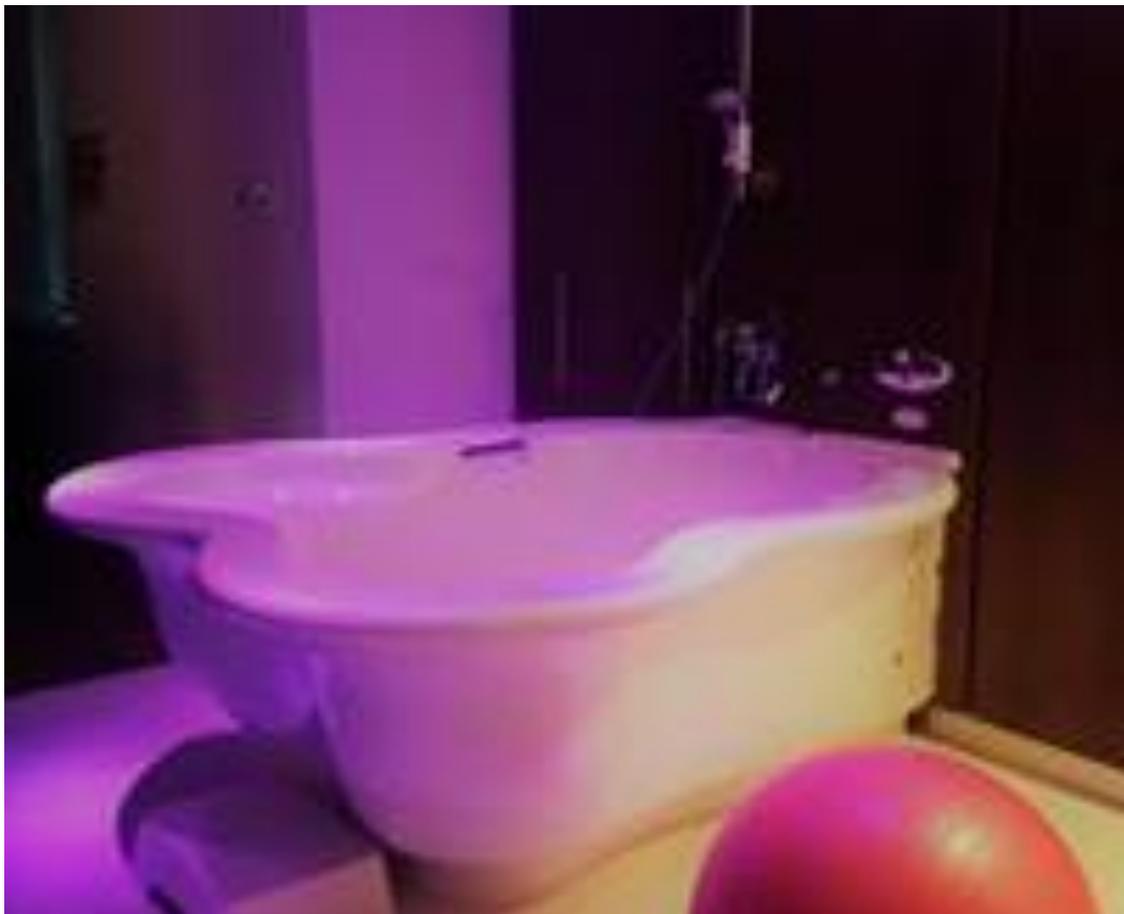




Patient Information Leaflet

# Choosing a Waterbirth



Today more and more women are considering using water for pain relief in labour. A midwife can support you in using a birthing pool at home or in our pool room on Delivery Suite. Using a birthing pool is likely to increase the chances of a normal vaginal delivery and therefore we would like to offer this option to as many women as possible. We have compiled this leaflet to give you and your partner relevant information about labouring and giving birth in water. Please talk to your midwife during the antenatal period who will be able to answer any questions.

## **Advantages of using water for labour and delivery**

Water immersion in labour has several perceived benefits including less painful contractions, less need for other methods of pain relief, shorter labour leading to an increased likelihood of achieving a natural birth. You may also find you have a more enjoyable labour experience, feeling in control to achieve a calm and normal birth of your baby. The water supports your weight allowing you to feel buoyant with easier mobility, allowing you to be more comfortable and conserving energy for labour. The relaxing effect of warm water also helps to produce endorphins, promoting the body's natural pain relief mechanism.

However it must be noted that there is no hard evidence to prove that water birth is better or worse, safer or less safe, for mother or baby.

## **Who can have a water birth?**

Healthy women with low risk pregnancies in labour over 37 weeks (and carrying only one baby in a head-down presentation), are offered the choice of using a birthing pool for labour and birth if they wish to do so.

The majority of women can still use the pool, even if a small intervention is needed. For example your labour is being induced because you are overdue, your waters have already broken, or if you need antibiotics for Group B Strep. However, there are several maternal and clinical conditions that may make labouring or birthing in water more risky. It is not advisable for you to use the pool if:

- If you have a medical condition or serious infection.
- If you have had complications in this or previous pregnancies.
- If we need to monitor your baby's heart rate more closely in labour (though in some circumstances we may be able to continuously monitor your baby's heartbeat with waterproof wireless CTG monitoring).

We also require those wishing to use the pool to be sufficiently mobile to enable rapid exit from the pool in case of emergency. If you had a Body Mass Index  $\geq 35$  at Booking, or have had a weight gain of 20kg or more during your pregnancy we would recommend avoiding use of the birthing pool due to the increased likelihood of your baby being larger and possible complications during the birth.

Even if your pregnancy is more complex you may still be able to use the pool during your labour but not for the birth. If water for labour appeals to you but you think you fall into the above criteria or have any other queries please contact your midwife who will be able to discuss this further.

## **Preparation for home waterbirth**

If you would like to use a birthing pool for a home birth you can either hire or buy one from any number of specialist organisations. Please discuss with your midwife where you may wish to place the pool at home, with regard to the following:

- Location of electrical sockets and equipment
- Whether the floor can bear the load of a full pool
- Providing adequate space around the pool
- Providing covering for the floor

If using a birth pool at home it is not recommended to pre fill the pool prior to labour or to maintain the temperature by use of a heater or recirculation pump due to risk of bacterial growth.

**If you are going to have a home waterbirth, it is advisable not to enter your birth pool until your community midwife arrives as the water may accelerate your labour.**

## **At what point do I enter the pool?**

You can benefit from water at any stage of your labour. However, there is some evidence to show that labour may slow down if you get into the pool too early before your contractions are regular. So we suggest that you enter the pool when you are in established labour with the optimal time for pool entry being cervical dilatation of 4-5cm and your midwife will guide you with this.

## **Labouring and delivering in water**

A midwife will care for you during your labour and delivery, providing emotional support and encouragement throughout. The midwife will listen to the baby's heartbeat every 15 minutes and more frequently when you begin pushing in the second stage of labour. Your blood pressure, temperature and pulse will also be regularly checked throughout. The midwife also monitors and maintains the temperature of the water very closely for your comfort and to minimise risks of the baby. You will be able to get in any position that is comfortable for you as long as the water is deep enough to ensure the baby's head is completely submerged during the birth.

You will be asked to leave the pool if there are any complications, for any internal examinations, if there are concerns with your baby's heartbeat or if your labour does not go as expected. Two midwives are usually present at the birth of your baby, and we request that you have someone with you at all times when you are in the pool.

## **What if I need additional pain relief?**

Breathing and relaxation techniques, massage and music are all very good coping strategies. Entonox (gas and air) is also available for you to use in the pool, and this works very well alongside the water.

You cannot use opiate pain relief, such as diamorphine or pethidine whilst you are in the pool as these drugs can cause drowsiness. If pethidine or diamorphine are/have been used you will need to wait approximately 2 hours before using the pool, until you feel more alert. You will also be unable to use the pool following an epidural.

## **Can I give birth to my baby in the water?**

Yes you can. You can get in and out of the pool as you please. You may choose to stay in the pool for pain relief in the first stage of labour and remain in the water for the birth, or you may prefer to leave the pool for the birth of your baby. It is your choice and you can decide your preference at the time.

Giving birth in the pool is carried out with a 'hands-off' approach from the midwife. Following the birth your baby's head will be gently guided out of the water by the midwife or yourself. Your midwife will give you verbal guidance and emotional support during this time. Once the baby has been born the head must not go back into the water in order to prevent inhaling water. Babies born in water tend to have their eyes open and be very calm. Sometimes the baby may take a short time to become pink. This is because the birth has been very gentle and is normal.

## **Will my baby breathe while it is under the water?**

This is a very common question. Babies typically breathe when they sense a change in the environment from the water into the air. A complex chain of chemical, hormonal and physical responses initiates the baby's first breath, so it doesn't occur under water.

The water temperature is monitored carefully during the birth to make sure the environment is right. We also make sure that the baby's head is totally submerged during the birth so the breathing reflex is not triggered too early.

## **Are there other risks?**

Waterbirth is extremely safe and evidence from numerous studies have confirmed the many advantages of giving birth in water, for both mothers and babies. However, there have been very rare documented cases of drowning, rupture of the umbilical cord, respiratory problems and waterborne infection. Clinical guidelines are followed by staff to minimise these risks and we take all precautions to ensure your safety and that of your baby at all times.

We are unable to accurately measure how much blood you may lose when you give birth or deliver your placenta in the pool, although if it appears excessive you will be asked to leave the pool.

Warm water is thought to increase the stretching of perineal muscles and reduce your risk of tearing. Results from some studies also suggest that waterbirth may be associated with a lower incidence of significant perineal tears; however the evidence is mixed. As waterbirth is carried out with a hands-off approach, your midwife will be unable to provide effective support to your perineum and this could lead to an increased risk of a more significant tear. Should you need to have any perineal suturing it will be done out of the water – though this is usually delayed for a little while to enable your skin to return to normal.

## **How is the placenta (afterbirth) delivered?**

If you have had a normal labour and birth you can stay in the water to birth your placenta without the assistance of drugs. If you prefer, you can have an oxytocic drug via an injection to help your placenta to come out but you need to get out of the pool after your baby is born for this. It is

your choice and as long as you understand your options you can decide at the time.

## **Reasons why you may need to leave the pool**

You may be asked to leave the pool for the following reasons:

- To use the toilet
- For additional pain relief
- If there is any evidence of meconium staining (when the baby opens its bowels) when your waters break
- If there is difficulty in hearing your baby's heart rate or any irregularity in the baby's heart rate
- For internal vaginal examinations to assess progress in labour
- If your blood pressure, pulse or temperature become abnormal
- If your labour does not progress as expected, or if we need to speed up your labour with a hormone drip
- In order to deliver the placenta

## **Can I book the pool in advance?**

As you do not know exactly when your labour will start it would be impossible to book the pool in advance. However, we will do our best to accommodate your wishes. Inform the midwife about your wishes to use the pool when you contact Delivery Suite prior to coming in labour.

## **What if the pool is already in use?**

If this does happen we will support you to stay relaxed and mobile and use other facilities such as a shower, bath or active birth equipment until the pool becomes available, or to consider the other forms of pain relief that we offer.

## **Is there anything I need?**

It is important you feel relaxed and comfortable when you are in the pool so the choice of what you wear is entirely up to you. Some women like to be naked when they give birth and find clothing gets in the way, being naked also allows skin-to-skin contact to take place straight away. Others feel more comfortable if they are wearing a T-shirt or a sports bra. It is important you are kept warm after you have left the pool so a dressing gown may be useful to assist this.

Due to the warm environment, it is important that you do not get dehydrated whilst using the pool so a water bottle for easy handling is encouraged and you may bring a light diet or isotonic drink if you wish.

## **How can the birth partner help?**

The main role of the birth partner is to support their labouring partner both physically and mentally, helping her to feel relaxed and cared for. We respectfully request that birth partners refrain from getting into the pool but would encourage their support in other ways. Keep the room calm, encouraging her to stay in control and to keep her breathing steady. Massaging shoulders and arms will help her to stay relaxed. You could help by assisting her to change position offering her drinks frequently and use a facecloth rinsed in cold water to keep her cool.

## **Emergency situations**

We have procedures in place to help you to exit the pool in an emergency and specialist equipment and staff will always be available. However, if an emergency occurs in the pool there may be problems or delays encountered relating to the logistics of leaving the pool which could impact upon the management. Ultimately there is a possibility the emergency will not be managed as effectively as on land.

Prior to your entry into the pool we will conduct a short safety assessment to ensure that you can safely get yourself in and out of the pool, and have been made aware of the circumstances when we may request you to leave the water. For your own safety, and for that of your baby we would request that you follow the guidance of your midwife and make efforts to comply with requests to exit the birthing pool.

## **What should I do if I think I would like a water birth?**

If you are interested in a water birth please discuss this with your midwife at your antenatal appointment so your wishes can be documented.

If you require this information in an alternative language or format (such as Braille, audiotape or large print), please ask the staff who are looking after you.

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