



Question: Is waterbirth safe? What are the benefits and risks for mothers and babies?

Answer: Yes, the available evidence shows waterbirth to be safe. Babies born in the water have had similar health outcomes compared to babies born on land. However, the evidence is not strong enough to examine rare adverse events or potential long-term benefits or harms of waterbirth.

Evidence: In 2016, researchers pooled 29 studies and compared nearly 14,000 waterbirths to over 25,000 landbirths.¹ There were no differences in neonatal mortality, NICU admissions, Apgar scores, or infection rates between the babies born in water and on land.

The largest randomized trial to ever examine waterbirth was conducted in 2015 at a hospital in China.² Low-risk, first-time mothers were randomly assigned to waterbirth (60 people) or land birth (60 people). They found that Apgar scores and volume of blood lost was similar between the two groups. Women in the waterbirth group had more minor perineal tears but fewer severe tears. The waterbirth group also experienced shorter labors (by an average of 50 minutes) and reported less pain.

The largest observational study ever on waterbirth – and first to report results from the U.S. – included over 6,500 waterbirths attended by midwives at homes and birth centers.³ For mothers and babies, waterbirth was associated with fewer postpartum transfers to the hospital and fewer hospital admissions during the first 6 weeks postpartum. There were no differences in newborn death rates or Apgar scores between water and land births. For unknown reasons, they found that mothers who gave birth in the water experienced a small increase in perineal trauma. Other researchers have found a decrease or elimination of episiotomies (cutting the vagina with scissors) with waterbirth.

What do professional organizations say about waterbirth?¹

The American College of Nurse Midwives, American Association of Birth Centers, and the Royal College of Obstetricians in the United Kingdom, support waterbirth as an option for healthy women. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) came out with a strong statement against waterbirth in 2014. In 2016, they updated their Opinion Statement to state that the potential risks have not been sufficiently studied to support or encourage a person's request to give birth in water. They continue to recommend that birth occur on land, not in water. However, they acknowledge the maternal benefits of water immersion during labor and support informed choice and more research on waterbirth.^{5,6}

What's the bottom line?

The bottom line is that waterbirth is a reasonable option for low-risk birthing people, as long as they understand the potential benefits and risks. If women have a strong desire for waterbirth, and there are care providers who are comfortable attending waterbirths, then at this time there is no evidence to ban this option of pain relief.

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“Evidence shows that babies born in the water have similar health outcomes compared to babies born on land.”

1. Taylor et al. (2016). "Neonatal outcomes of waterbirth: a systematic review and meta-analysis". Arch Dis Child Fetal Neonatal Ed 101: F357-65. [Click here.](#)
2. Gayiti et al. (2015). "Comparison of the effects of water and traditional delivery on birthing women and newborns". Eur Rev Med Pharmacol Sci 19:1554-8. [Click here.](#) Free full text.
3. Bovbjerg et al. (2016). "Maternal and Newborn Outcomes Following Waterbirth: The Midwives Alliance of North America Statistics Project, 2004 to 2009 Cohort". J Midwifery Womens Health 61:11-20. [Click here.](#) Free full text.
4. Nutter et al. (2014). "Waterbirth: an integrative analysis of peer-reviewed literature". J Midwifery Womens Health 59: 286-319. [Click here.](#)
5. American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (2016). "Immersion in Water During Labor and Delivery". Obstet Gynecol 128:231-236. [Click here.](#)
6. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists/Royal College of Midwives (2006). "Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists/ Royal College of Midwives Joint statement No. 1: Immersion in water during labour and birth." [Click here.](#)