

Using Water for Labour and Birth

This leaflet is to provide women with information about the use of water during labour and birth. The maternity unit at the NNUH has one birthing pool on Delivery Suite and three on the Midwife Led Birthing Unit (MLBU).

What are the benefits of using a pool for labour/birth?

The water in a birthing pool supports the body, allowing a feeling of buoyancy and comfort. This makes mobility easier which conserves a woman's energy during her labour. Reduction in the need for other strong pain relief.

The relaxing effect of warm water helps produce endorphins, promoting the body's natural pain relief mechanism.

A feeling of being more in control of your body. A calm unhurried birth of the baby aided by the counterpressure of the water. A relaxed warm baby guided straight into the arms of the woman.

What are the risks of using the pool for labour/birth?

Research evidence shows that there is no increased risk to you or your baby if you labour and birth in water compared to 'dry' land. Although there are risks with all births, we work hard to minimise any potential problems.

For healthy women with an uncomplicated term pregnancy, complications appear rare, provided guidelines for the use of water in labour are followed carefully. The midwife will aim to provide a positive birth experience for both you and your partner and will discuss any concerns that she may have during your labour with you.

Your co-operation with any advice will be for you and your baby's safety. If an emergency arises you will be advised to leave the water as quickly as possible.

Who can use the pool?

You should be able to use the pool if you have had an uncomplicated pregnancy and are between 37 and 42 weeks pregnant and haven't suffered from any significant medical conditions or complications during this or any previous pregnancy.

It is not advised to use the pool with a multiple (twin) pregnancy or if your baby is in the breech position. You should be physically able to get in and out of the pool and have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 40 or less. Your iron count needs to be at a good level, 100g/L or more. In most cases, women can use the pool if a small intervention is needed. For example, if you need antibiotics for group B strep.

What happens if I am told I am unsuitable for a waterbirth, but I still want to go ahead with one?

If you are told that you are not eligible to use water in labour, but you think that it is the right choice for you, discuss all your options with your midwife. Your midwife will discuss the risks and benefits with you and may refer you to your Consultant Obstetrician for further discussion. It may not be possible to support your request for the use of water in labour, but your midwife will be able to discuss your options for labour and birth, including alternative methods of pain relief such as using the shower for pain relief and relaxing during your labour.

Do I need to book the pool?

The birthing pools at the NNUH cannot be booked. However, Midwives will try to accommodate your request to use the pool but, at busy times it will be dependent on availability. If you decide to have your baby at home, you can purchase or hire your own birthing pool. If you choose this option, it is your responsibility to erect, fill and empty your own pool. Pre-filled heated birthing pools, where the temperature is maintained by use of a heater and pump, are not recommended for labour or birth because of a possible association with Legionnaire's disease. In the hospital there is an evacuation process for dealing with rare emergency situations in the pool. In the homebirth situation you must be aware that in the event of an emergency it may not be so easy to evacuate you and as such careful consideration should be given to the positioning of the pool within your home.

What should I bring from home if I want to labour/birth in water?

It is useful to think about what to wear in the pool. Most women are comfortable in a 2-piece swimming costume (bikini) or loose t-shirt. If you have long hair, a hairband to keep your hair up out of the water. A drinks bottle to make it easy to stay hydrated while in the water. Your own choice of music that helps you relax. A selection of snacks that are easy to eat while in the pool.

Does being in the pool slow labour?

Immersion in water before active labour has begun has been shown to slow the progress of labour. It is therefore better to avoid entering the pool until the labour is established. If you are wishing to use a pool at home, it is advisable to wait until the midwife arrives before entering the pool so that she can assess if you are ready and that all is well with you and your baby. You can, however, use the normal bath or shower to help you in early labour.

How warm is the water?

The water temperature is usually between 34-37°C during the first stage of labour, and you can regulate it to suit you throughout this stage. For your baby's birth, the water needs to be about 37°C. The midwife will monitor the water temperature hourly to ensure that you are comfortable and are not becoming too hot. The temperature of the water should not be above 37.5°C.

What if I need additional pain relief?

You may like to consider using aromatherapy oils or Entonox (gas and air) to help in addition to the water. If this does not provide enough pain relief for you the midwife may advise you to leave the pool for other pain relief such as Pethidine or an epidural.

How will my baby's heart rate be monitored?

The midwife will use a handheld doppler which can be safely used while you are in the water. The midwife will listen regularly to assess the wellbeing of your baby. If it has been identified that continuous monitoring of your baby's heart rate is required, in certain situations the midwife can use a wireless telemetry monitor which enables this to happen.

When might the midwife suggest I get out of the pool?

The Midwife will recommend that you get out of the pool if she has any concerns regarding you or your baby's wellbeing. You will be advised to leave the pool every 2 – 3 hours to go to the toilet to pass urine. If a vaginal examination is indicated, the midwife will ask you to get out of the pool as this is more accurate on a bed in a lying down position. If labour is slower than recommended, you may be asked to leave the pool.

Will the baby breath while it is under the water and how long does the baby remain under the water after birth?

A concern for some people is that the baby will breath whilst still under the water – this is highly unlikely as there are many mechanisms that prevent this from happening, one of which is the change in temperature that normally occurs when a baby is born. The water temperature is carefully monitored throughout labour to prevent this occurring. Ensuring the baby's head is totally submerged during birth also prevents the breathing reflex from starting until the head is clear of the water.

How is the placenta (afterbirth) delivered?

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

You can choose to leave the pool to deliver your placenta, your midwife will help you out of the pool and you can deliver either on a bed or mat on the floor. This can be done with or without the aid of an injection of an oxytocic drug.

If you have further questions, your midwife will be able to advise you.

