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GIVING BIRTH BASED ON BEST EVIDENCE

Waterbirth

By Rebecca Dekker, PhD, RN, APRN of EvidenceBasedBirth.com

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

Answer: Yes, the available evidence shows waterbirth is safe. Babies born in the water have had similar health compared to babies born on land.

Evidence: More than 28,000 waterbirths have been observed in research studies. Although most of these studies were not randomized trials, results from

Women who have waterbirths also have:

- Higher rates of intact perineum
- Lower rates of 3rd and 4th degree tears
- Less blood loss or no difference in blood loss
- Less use of pain medication
- Higher levels of satisfaction

Benefits and risks for babies:

Researchers have found that compared to babies born on

Why did the ACOG/AAP position statement say waterbirth was not safe?²

The ACOG/AAP opinion statement on waterbirth was of **poor scientific quality**.

Among other flaws, the ACOG/AAP statement had:

- An outdated, inaccurate, and incomplete review of the evidence
- Multiple errors and mistakes
- Sole reliance on case reports instead of looking at higher quality levels of evidence

In contrast, based on their review of the evidence, the American College of Nurse Midwives stated that waterbirth should be made available by qualified health providers.³

The bottom line is that waterbirth is a **reasonable option** for low-risk women, 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 in attending water-

births, then at this time there is no evidence to deny women 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.”

multiple high-quality, large studies are reassuring. Harmful effects in large studies were either non-existent or very rare.¹

Benefits for mothers:

Importantly, women who give birth in the water have a significant **decrease or total elimination in the use of vaginal cutting with scissors** (episiotomy) by their care providers.

land, babies born in the water have:

- No difference in Apgar scores
- No difference in newborn infection rates (very rare)
- No differences in NICU admission rates
- Umbilical cord tears are rare (2.4 per 1,000 waterbirths)
- No increase in mortality rates

References

1. [Nutter, E., S. Meyer, et al. \(2014\)](#). “Waterbirth: an integrative analysis of peer-reviewed literature.” *J Midwifery Womens Health* 59(3): 286-319.
2. [ACOG Committee on Obstetric Practice and the American Academy of Pediatrics \(2014\)](#). “ACOG Committee Opinion no. 594: Immersion in water during labor and delivery.” *Obstet Gynecol* 123(4): 912-915.
3. [American College of Nurse Midwives. \(2014\)](#). “Position statement: Hydrotherapy during labor and birth.”

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