

Safety and underwater birth—what every risk manager should know

By Larry Veltman, MD, and Diane Doherty, MS, CPHRM

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Underwater birthing has become a popular birth practice in some areas of the country. Although many of these deliveries occur in a home birth setting, the practice has also been implemented in hospitals and birthing centers. There is continued controversy about the risks and benefits of underwater birthing (as opposed to hydrotherapy during labor), and many risk managers are unaware of these potential risks and benefits. The purpose of this article is to review the significant risks and benefits of underwater birthing, to review relevant literature and several Professional Organizations’ Position Statements regarding underwater birthing, and to provide a safety checklist for hospital risk managers who wish to consider adding underwater birthing to their current scope of perinatal care.

INTRODUCTION

The actual number of underwater births occurring in this country is unknown at present because many are conducted as part of a home birth. It is estimated that there are approximately 25 000 home births occurring each year in the United States.¹ According to a published account of underwater birth practice in America, about 250 hospitals and 70% of all birth centers support water birth (here referred to as *underwater birth*).² This statistic refers to the practice of actually delivering the baby under water, which is different from the concept of water labor (also called hydrotherapy or water immersion during the first stage of labor). Although spawned by the growth in popularity of natural and alternative medicine, it appears that underwater births are occurring in many institutions absent mainstream validation as a safe obstetrical practice.

A review of MEDLINE-referenced articles reveals no substantial controlled research or randomized control trials of underwater births. Although there have been studies assessing water immersion during labor that have shown a reduction in the use of epidural, spinal, and paracervical analgesia, insufficient data exist to determine the outcome and safety for women and infants from randomized trials of underwater birth.

A recent Cochrane Review came to the following conclusion:

Overall, the evidence indicates that immersion in water during the first stage decreases maternal uptake of epidural/spinal analgesia, and that water immersion during the first stage of labour can be supported for women at low risk of

complications. Immersion during the second stage of labour needs further investigation, but at present there is no clear evidence to support or not to support a woman's decision to give birth in water.^{3(p19)}

In particular, the following questions remain unanswered:

- Is the efficacy and safety of underwater birth at least equal to conventional birth?
- Is there objective information to support each claim of benefit?
- Does outcome vary by setting (ie, home underwater birth, birthing center water birth, or hospital-based underwater birth)?
- Is water labor (immersion) without underwater birth efficacious and safe?
- Does immersion add risk to conventional birth?
- What are the risk factors in pregnancy or labor in which even immersion should be avoided?

Safety information related to underwater birthing is available in the form of anecdotal case studies that underscore adverse events, including, but not limited to, water aspiration and subsequent pulmonary edema, water intoxication, hyponatremia, hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy, cord rupture with neonatal hemorrhage, and pneumonia. Of significant note in the literature review is the disparity of opinion and practice that exists among the medical community and the proponents of underwater birth, as evidenced by the strong position statements of leading medical professional organizations and those organizations promoting underwater birth.

One of the chief concerns regarding underwater birthing is an apparent lack of consensus on safety guidelines established by way of peer-reviewed publications, conferences, and evidence-based clinical protocols. Safe parameters of care at the national level for water-quality assessments, temperature and maintenance of water, water depth, and fetal and maternal assessments, among other imperatives, are lacking. At present, it appears that mainstream acceptance of underwater birth will depend on whether its advocates can satisfy the traditional medical community's questions of safety and efficacy. A collaborative, randomized study to either establish or rule out the possible benefits and harmful effects of underwater births to the mother and her newborn infant would help to establish its overall legitimacy.

If, after review of the literature and study of the safety issues associated with underwater birth, an organization wishes to implement underwater birthing (in addition to hydrotherapy or immersion during the first stage of labor), this article offers assistance in crafting safety guidelines, checklists, and operational protocols. It will also review:

- Suggested benefits
- Reported risks
- Position statements from professional organizations
- Contraindications to underwater birthing
- Common safety guidelines
- A self-assessment tool and checklist on underwater births
- Resource articles

SOME PROPOSED BENEFITS OF HYDROTHERAPY IN LABOR AND UNDERWATER BIRTH

The proponents of underwater birth list some of the following benefits to the pregnant woman of laboring and/or giving birth in water:

- **Comfort:** Some studies have shown that women using water for childbirth request fewer or no methods of pain relief.
- **Buoyancy:** Giving birth in water counteracts the effects of gravity, making it easier for the mother to change positions and avoid placing pressure on the uterus.
- **Lower blood pressure:** This effect can result from a calm environment, increased relaxation, and anxiety reduction.
- **Less trauma:** Giving birth in water can halt the fear-tension-pain cycle, allowing the perineum to gently stretch and reducing the incidence of tearing.
- **Fewer interventions:** Water birthing is viewed as a natural process, free of routine IVs, internal fetal monitors, time limits on labor, and oxytocin protocols.
- **Environmental control:** Increased control over the maternal environment is advocated, from lighting choices and background noise to personal attire.
- **Shorter labor:** Smoother transitions are due in part to the relaxed state of the mother and the water's insulating effects.⁴

REPORTED RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH UNDERWATER BIRTH

The following neonatal complications are some of the adverse effects potentially associated with underwater birth⁵:

- Water drowning
- Hyponatremia induced seizures
- Waterborne infectious disease
- Cord rupture with hemorrhage

- Hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy
- Pneumonia and respiratory distress syndrome
- Death

PUBLISHED STATEMENTS

American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)

ACOG does not feel there is enough information, specifically concerning rates of infection, to recommend warm water immersion as a safe and appropriate birthing alternative. There are concerns that an infant can develop an infection if he or she begins breathing while underwater and inhales the soiled birthing water. ACOG maintains that water birthing should only be performed under the strictest measures of infection control, and should be considered only for healthy moms and babies.⁶

American Academy of Pediatrics

The safety and efficacy of underwater birth for the newborn has not been established. There is no convincing evidence of benefit to the neonate, but some concern for serious harm. Therefore, underwater birth should be considered an experimental procedure that should not be performed except within the context of an appropriately designed randomized clinical trial after informed parental consent.^{7(p2)}

Centers for Disease Control

Water births, pioneered in the 1960s, are increasingly being used. The perceived infection problem is that the birthing-pool water becomes contaminated with amniotic fluid, blood, and fecal material, all of which contain large quantities of maternal bacteria and viruses. Risks include bloodborne viruses, e.g., hepatitis B and C, HIV-1, and HIV-2, and fecal-orally transmitted viruses, e.g., the enteroviruses and adenoviruses. Many of these concerns may be unfounded, and calls for maternal testing for HIV have not been supported. A more reasonable approach is to ensure that infection control policies for water births include instructions for pool maintenance and decontamination, use of universal precautions and use of personal protective equipment for staff. Postnatal surveillance of mothers and babies should be conducted to define infection rates.⁸

Guidelines for Perinatal Care

Over the past 25 years, underwater birth has become more popular in certain parts of the world despite a paucity of data demonstrating that it is either beneficial or safe. Underwater birth occurs either intentionally or accidentally after water immersion for labor, a procedure promoted primarily as a means of decreasing maternal discomfort. Although there is no suggested benefit of underwater birth for the newborn, the morbidities identified in clinical reports have raised concerns that this mode of delivery may not be safe. Numerous case

reports have associated underwater birth with respiratory distress, hyponatremia, infections, hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy, ruptured umbilical cords, seizures, tachycardia and fever (related to water temperature of the bath), and near drowning in newborns and fetuses. There is no convincing evidence of benefit to the neonate but some concern for serious harm. Therefore, underwater birth should be considered an experimental procedure that should not be performed except within the context of an appropriately designed randomized controlled trial after informed parental consent.^{9(p170)}

American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) and Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN)

These organizations currently have not, to date, published position statements on either hydrotherapy or water births.

PATIENT SELECTION

In most instances, patients who are candidates for underwater birth should be low risk on admission and remain low risk during their entire labor and delivery. A general statement to patients regarding who might be a candidate could say:

In general, your pregnancy must be normal with no sign of high blood pressure, diabetes, previous c-section, or problems with the baby. If you have medical or obstetrical problems that put you and your baby at high risk, you would not be allowed to give birth in the tub. In some instances, you may labor in the tub, but would be required to come out of the tub for delivery only.¹⁰

The following are examples of medical and obstetrical conditions that might be reasonably considered contraindications to underwater birthing. A multidisciplinary team should help develop a list for each perinatal unit considering establishing an underwater birth protocol:

- Preterm labor, two weeks or more prior to due date
- Breech presentation (or other malpresentations)
- Past diagnosis of excessive bleeding, post-partum hemorrhage, or active maternal infection
- Presence of thick meconium
- Abnormal fetal heart tracing requiring continuous fetal monitoring
- Preeclampsia
- History of herpes, HIV, or other infectious diseases
- Comprehension or language difficulties (where interpreter service is not available)
- Lack of appropriate backup personnel

COMMON SAFETY GUIDELINES

Currently, there are no national guidelines ensuring the consistent use of birthing pools. Each organization must determine its own protocols and policies taking into account available research and the institution's level of resource support. When contemplating underwater births or hydrotherapy to be used only during labor, there are several issues that organizations must consider. It is best to have a multidisciplinary planning team consisting of representatives from the medical and nursing staff, risk

management, infection control, biomedical, and house-keeping engage in this process from the outset. The following worksheet may be helpful for organizations, and is based on the recommendations of underwater birthing resource organizations such as the Global Maternal/Child Health Association and Waterbirth International. In addition, there are numerous for-profit organizations that host Web sites dedicated to the discussion of safe underwater birthing that provides additional information on the topic. (See **Exhibit 1** for an example of the worksheet; **Exhibit 2** is a checklist for underwater birth safety.)

Exhibit 1:

Worksheet for Underwater Birthing Safety Considerations

Safety Initiative	Considerations	Policy in Place? Yes/No	Comments
Staffing and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members of the birthing team may include: obstetrician, nurse midwife, registered nurse, doula, and/or other birthing companion. Staffing levels should be adequate to ensure the mother can be removed from the bath if she is unable to do it herself. A comprehensive educational curriculum for medical and nursing staff should be initiated on underwater birthing. 		
Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriate underwater birthing site in proximity of the labor and delivery unit, tubs specifically built for underwater birthing and with the ability to rapidly lower water levels in an emergency Water thermometer Maternal thermometer Waterproof Doppler or waterproof telemetry for electronically monitoring the fetus Gloves sufficiently long enough to cover bare skin when there is potential for contact with amniotic fluid or blood Waterproof gown or apron for attendants Protective eyewear, mask Kneeling pads and patient lifting device, including patient sling (and battery/charger for lifting device) Slip-resistant flooring around the tub Bathtub plug with chain attached Neonatal resuscitation equipment in the immediate birthing area 		
General Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A midwife or support person remains with the mother while she is in the bath. Ordinary tap water, free of additives and oils, should be used. Before the mother enters the tub, ensure the hoist battery is charged and placed in the hoist device. For privacy and to ensure appropriate monitoring by staff, the bathing area should be appropriately identified as occupied when in use. Equip the tub with an emergency call light that is visible outside the bathing area. Remove the mother from the tub if it becomes heavily contaminated. Consider birthing tub and surrounding area in fall prevention program. 		

Continues

Exhibit 1: *Continued*

Safety Initiative	Considerations	Policy in Place? Yes/No	Comments
Employee Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow hospital policies on safe handling, lifting, and patient transport. Document ongoing electrical and safety maintenance of birthing tubs, as well as any required repairs per hospital policy. Install overhead hoist tracking in birthing room and make portable lifting devices readily available. Design tubs to ensure compliance with OSHA standards and requirements for access. 		
Establishment of Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion	Please refer to patient selection criteria.		
Documentation of Informed Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a consent process (and form) consistent with the usual processes used by the institution for obtaining informed consent. This should utilize multidisciplinary perinatal input and include consultation with the organization's legal team. The consent form should disclose in writing the known maternal and fetal risks associated with underwater births. It should inform the mother that, per empirical research, underwater birth is not a validated obstetrical practice. The consent discussion and form should specifically address the issue of the mother's agreeing to leave the birthing tub at the request of any of her providers or staff for any reason of safety. 		
Water Temperature and Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The bath water should remain between 89.6 and 98.6 degrees F (32–37 degrees C). Maintain the water quality so the mother and birth companion are able to see the infant and assess the progression of labor. Murky water will make it difficult to determine if the umbilical cord is around the infant's neck or to detect other risk factors. 		
Infection Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protective clothing should be worn by staff, as appropriate. Gloves should be used when in contact with maternal blood and body fluids in the bath water per the hospital's policy on standard precautions. Follow the hospital protocol for blood and bodily fluid spills and document maintenance and cleanup. 		
Housekeeping; Biomedical Engineering Department; Immersion Issues, Amount of Water, Duration, and Timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish clear policies and procedures on cleaning and terminal cleaning. Open lines of communication with Biomedical Engineering Department and maintain regular interaction regarding maintenance of all components of the process. The level of water should not be above the mother's axilla. Water levels should not be so deep that a birth companion cannot see clearly to the bottom. The mother must be able to stabilize her position in the water. Monitor and document how much of the mother's body is under water. Change positions or remove extremities from the water to increase comfort and enhance labor progress. Caution against entering the tub too early, since prolonged immersion can lower the level of oxytocin in the body and slow labor. Immersion before 5 cm dilatation correlates to longer labor in some women. After 90 to 120 minutes, the positive effects of the birthing technique generally wane and labor may slow. 		

Continues

Exhibit 1: Continued

Safety Initiative	Considerations	Policy in Place? Yes/No	Comments
Written Policies and Procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguish between hydrotherapy during labor and actual birthing under water • Who and how many can be in the pool • How long the baby stays underwater • Criteria for moving the mother out of the pool • Monitoring temperature • Monitoring the fetus • Staffing ratios • Neonatal Resuscitation Program (NRP)–certified staff in attendance • Contraindications • Medication use and limitations • What may or may not be brought into the hospital to use as a birthing tub or bath 		
Delivery Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever possible, support a hands-off birth philosophy via quiet verbal guidance. • The cord should be loosened and disentangled in the customary manner as the infant is born. • If the cord is around the infant’s neck and needs to be cut, the mother is to be assisted to a standing position out of the water and remain standing for the duration of the delivery. • Under no circumstances should the cord be clamped and cut under water, since this action can stimulate the infant to breathe. • The infant must be born completely under water, with no air contact until it is brought gently to the surface. • An APGAR score should be recorded at 1 and 5 minutes after birth (as for normal land births), not upon removal from the bath. 		
Removal of Infant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The infant does not need to stay underneath the water for any specific period of time. • Removal from the water in less than 10 seconds is recommended. • Avoid undue traction on the umbilical cord as the infant’s head surfaces from the water to avoid potential cord rupture. • Safely remove the infant from the water and place it skin-to-skin on the mother’s chest. • Under no circumstances should the infant’s head be resubmerged under water. • Dry the infant thoroughly to reduce heat loss. • Document any delayed cord-clamping issues. 		
Management of Emergencies	<p>Drills and simulations for common emergencies that may occur in the water during birth. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shoulder dystocia • Hemorrhage • Need for neonatal resuscitation and special issues such as water inhalation • Maternal collapse • Moving patients out of the tub • Fall prevention [moved to “general safety” above] 		

Continues

Exhibit 1: Continued

Safety Initiative	Considerations	Policy in Place? Yes/No	Comments
Analgesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nitrous oxide and oxygen may be used in the bath if required. • The mother cannot receive opiate analgesia 4 hours prior to entering the bath. • Opiate analgesia is not administered while the mother is in the bath. • Intramuscular injections should not be given under water, but should be given in the deltoid while the mother is in the bath. 		
Documentation Parameters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal and fetal observations for all stages of labor should be guided by the hospital protocol for land births, with the exception of maternal temperature, which is monitored and documented hourly while the mother is in the tub. • Bath water temperature is measured and documented every hour and after adding water to ensure that water temperature remains between 32 and 37 degrees C. • Document maternal exits from the bath for bladder management at least every 2 hours. • Note oral fluid intake to ensure adequate hydration and to prevent overheating. • Record times when mother enters or leaves the bath. 		
Emergency Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlist the support of the hospital's rapid response team as needed. • Emergency equipment must be available and ready for use inside or just outside of the room. • Code blues should be run per hospital protocol. • Remove the mother from the tub as soon as is reasonably practicable, utilizing the most appropriate means. • If infant respiration is not facilitated within 1 minute of birth, the cord should be clamped and cut, and the infant removed from the bath for resuscitation. 		

Exhibit 2:

A Checklist for Underwater Birth Safety

- In-house legal review, IRB assessment, and strategic planning regarding initiation of underwater birthing service.
- Dedicate resources to space and equipment specifically for this service.
 - Address issues of allowing outside equipment to be used in the hospital, mainly birthing tubs. (Are certain tubs “approved” by the organization with regard to electrical and other safety issues? Also, who is responsible for set-up, tear-down, and maintenance during labor?)
- Establish criteria for inclusion and exclusion of patients for underwater birthing.
- Write specific consents with risks and benefits explained (see Exhibit 1 for discussion of consent components and processes).
- Write specific policies and procedures governing underwater birthing at the institution.
 - Distinguish between hydrotherapy during labor and actual birthing under water, who and how many can be in the pool, how long the baby stays under water, criteria for moving the mother out of the pool, monitoring temperature of the water, monitoring the fetal status (electronically or by auscultation), nursing staffing ratios, indications for resuscitation team attendance, contraindications, medication use, and limitations.

Continues

Exhibit 2: Continued

- Ensure advance planning between the patient and hospital, to avoid “surprise” admission and expectations of the patient in triage.
- Ensure the technology to perform intrauterine fetal monitoring in water with appropriate waterproof equipment.
- Interact with various departments that will interface with equipment.
 - Infection control
 - Biomedicine
 - Housekeeping
 - Occupational health
- Develop protocols and simulation training for potential emergencies occurring in the water birth environment, for example:
 - Shoulder dystocia
 - Hemorrhage
 - Need for neonatal resuscitation and special issues such as water inhalation
 - Maternal collapse
 - Expeditiously moving patients out of the tub
- Develop a program of occupational health for professionals who work in the environment with regard to infection protection and musculoskeletal work-related injuries associated with delivery and moving patients in and out of the water birth tubs.

While the safety of hydrotherapy during labor has support in the literature, questions remain regarding the safety of actually giving birth under water. We know that underwater birth has strong supporters and strong detractors. While the safety of the entire process continues to be debated, there is no question that there are many safety principles surrounding the process that should be applied when an organization decides to offer underwater birth as an option. It was the purpose of this article to outline these safety principles so risk managers and their organizations can be guided to develop policies, procedures, and protocols that are compliant with known risks and benefits in order to make birthing under water as safe as possible under our current state of evidence.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Links have been provided to the abstracts of the resource articles listed here. In most cases, purchase and/or membership are necessary for the full text. Some sites offer the article in full PDF text.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Larry Veltman, MD, practiced obstetrics and gynecology in Portland, Oregon, for 30 years. He was the chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland, Oregon. He served as chair of the Professional Liability Committee of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and was a member of ACOG's Committee on Patient Safety and Quality Improvement. He has been involved with risk management since 1985 and a member of ASHRM since 1988. In 2000, he was the chairperson of the ASHRM Task Force that published Risk Management Pearls for Obstetrics. He has published articles and given presentations on teaching risk management to physicians, patient safety in obstetrics, vaginal birth after cesarean section, and the patient safety aspects of disruptive professional behavior. **Diane Doberty, MS, CPHRM**, is vice president of ACE Medical Risk. Diane joined ACE in 2003 and is responsible for providing a broad range of risk consulting services to clients that are designed and customized to help meet continuously evolving healthcare industry challenges and proactively address unique risk management needs. Diane has over 25 years of experience in healthcare risk management. Prior to joining ACE Medical Risk, Diane worked for CNA HealthPro as a risk control consulting director. She was also a risk manager at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and gained her medical malpractice experience as a claims examiner for a New York City-based risk management firm. Diane's areas of specialization include clinical risk management, hospital administration, quality management, patient safety, and claims management. Diane received her master of science in health services administration and her CPHRM designation in December 2001. She is an active member of ASHRM and several State Chapters.