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Water birth: A boon for the mother

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Abstract

A number of potential benefits for both mother and baby have been attributed to labouring and giving birth in water. Some of these seem to be backed up by common sense, and some have been supported by research. A number of hazards of labouring in water have also been suggested. An important element in using immersion in water for labour and possibly for the birth of the baby is that it provides an effective way of helping the woman cope with the pain of labour, and gives back control of birth to the woman herself. Yet there is more to it even than that. It seems to create an entirely different environment and atmosphere for a woman giving birth, as it does also for the midwife caring for her. Birth takes place in a quiet room, with personal care from a midwife who is concerned to support the normal physiological process of birth.

Keywords: Labour, womb, maternity care, thrilled, hydrotherapy, delivery, fear, anxiety, stress, aromatherapy, caesarean, blood pressure, oxytocin, endorphins, newborn

Introduction

Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet in dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it. The soft overcomes the hard, the gentle overcomes the rigid.

History of Water Birth

The concept of water birth is relatively new to India. However, water births can be traced way back to the legends of South Pacific Islanders giving birth in shallow seawater and of Egyptian pharaohs born in water. In some parts of the world today, such as Guyana, in South America, women go to a special place at the local river to give birth.

Giving birth in water, rather than labouring in air is a relatively recent development in the Western world. The first water birth in Europe that we know about was in 1803 in France. A mother whose labour had been extremely long and difficult was finally helped to give birth in a tub of warm water.

In the 1970s, some doctors in Russia and France became interested in ways of helping babies make the transition from life in the uterus (womb) to life outside as smooth as possible. They were worried about the way women in labour were cared for in developed countries. Their concern was that modern maternity care, with lots of intervention, was making birth traumatic for babies. Some doctors thought babies could be affected for life because of the way they came into the world.

As well as helping women cope with the pain of childbirth, water births also seemed to offer babies a more peaceful journey from the uterus (womb) into their mums' arms. Babies are bathed in warm water as they emerge from the birth canal, and the pool environment feels similar to the enveloping warmth of the uterus. Doctors noted how calm babies were after they had been born in water. They cried less than babies born in air. They appeared more relaxed and were eager to have eye contact with their mums and to breastfeed. During the 1980s and 1990s, interest in water birth grew in Europe and Canada.

Water Birth in India

Water birth is a relatively recent and rare offering in India. The first water birth we know in India was reported in the media in 2007. Water birth facilities are being adopted in different cities and becoming a slowly-growing trend. There is also a strong disagreement on the safety of water birth.

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Due to this, and lack of enough evidence to either support or discourage water birth, it is not recommended by most doctors in India. It is also worth noting that, water births are recommended in the UK, but not recommended in the US.

Water Birth has finally made its way into India. The first baby was born end April in Delhi. It's a water baby for former South African cricketer Jonty Rhodes whose wife Melanie Jeanee delivered at a Santa Cruz hospital on Thursday afternoon. The couple have named their daughter, born in the midst of the IPL cricketing season, India Jeanne Jonty Rhodes.

"The baby girl, born by natural water birth, at 3.29 pm weighs 3.71 kg. The couple are extremely overwhelmed and thrilled about the new addition to the family," said Dr Bhupendra Avasthi of Surya Mother and Child Care hospital at Santa Cruz.

Water birth is beyond the physical aspect of water, it is an attitude to care, an attitude which believes in the normal physiology of labour and the ability to deliver with minimum medical intervention in low risk labouring women. It's an attitude both of the medical personnel as well as the woman in labour.

What is Water Birth?

The technique, also known as "hydrotherapy" was first used in France in 1803 and is quite popular in Western countries as doctors feel that it not only makes deliveries more comfortable for women but also prevent any infection or complications. Water birth is an ancient technique that plays a crucial role in reducing labour pain for women during normal delivery and avoid cesarean section. The mother in labour is immersed in pool of adequately warm water. With increased tension, fear, anxiety and stress level, many pregnant women are opting for water birth technique for the delivery of their babies.

Who Can Offer Water Birth

Practitioners who have a track record of high percentage of normal vaginal deliveries, who have the experience and patience to let women labour at their own pace, who can provide one to one care and support, monitoring constantly both the mother and baby, and if required, have the infrastructure to safely and quickly intervene when required. Water is known to be relaxing, rejuvenating. A warm bath at the end of the day refreshes.

Michel Odent in 1960s used this medium to give pain relief in labour, one of his patients was so comfortable there, that for delivery, she refused to get out of the bath tub and delivered a calm baby under water.

This accidental under water delivery made him do extensive research and he came to the conclusion that water is safe for both mother and baby. This is subsequently found out to be true by thousands of mothers all over the world.

Benefits of Water Birth

Water helps provide relief to women in labour and facilitates child birth. Hydrotherapy can be complimented by aromatherapy, massages for relaxation. [Use water birth tech to reduce labour pain, avoid cesarean]

Relaxation: If the mother is very tense, contractions can become erratic. Labour stops and starts without progressing steadily. The relaxing effect of water will help to keep the

contractions in rhythm so that they are less stressful for the mother and the baby.

Shorter labour: The water helps to relax muscles, so that the mother don't waste any energy being tense. All the energy can be used to focus on contractions. This will help make labour quicker.

Privacy and control: When the mother is in the pool, she is in her own world and may feel much more in control. She can labour undisturbed in the privacy of the pool.

Buoyancy: The water makes it easy for the mother to move about, so that she can make herself comfortable. The best position for the mother is likely to be the one to help the baby move most easily through her pelvis.

Coping with pain: Being immersed in warm water may make contractions more bearable, just as having a bath helps ease tummy ache or backache. Therefore, it is less likely to need pain relief drugs such as pethidine or an epidural to cope.

Constant presence of a doctor: Hospital protocols state that a doctor must be with the mother all the time she is in the birthing pool. If she is labouring on dry land, it is quite common for the doctor to leave her for periods while she attends to other women in labour.

Natural labour: If women is using a birthing pool, she is less likely to have medical interventions in labour.

Risks of Water Birth

Application of water birth technique requires a far greater rigour than the conventional deliveries as it takes more time and one has to arrange huge amounts of processed water of the highest quality and the medical practitioner must be highly motivated to tread a different path. [10 Ways To Speed Up Labour Pain]

Baby starting to breathe underwater: The mother might be frightened that her baby will inhale water if he is born in the birthing pool and starts breathing before he has been brought to the surface. However, preliminary research suggests that babies may only be at risk of inhaling water if they are kept under water for a long time (up to an hour). The baby will still be receiving oxygen via the umbilical cord, which is attached to the placenta inside you.

Greater risk of tearing: Some doctors believe that the perineum is more likely to tear if a woman gives birth in water.

Snapped umbilical cord: It's slightly more common for the umbilical cord to snap following a water birth than a land birth. A snapped cord should not be an emergency situation for a properly trained doctor. Doctors are now advised to avoid pulling on the cord as they lift the baby from the water into his mother's arms.

" Birthing in water is considered to be one of the most beneficial options for a woman and her baby. It creates a naturally calm and peaceful atmosphere and allows the freedom of movement and pain release," said Dr Avasthi.

Rosanna A Zanetti Daellenbach *et al.* conducted a prospective observational study on 513 women, who wished to have water birth. The goal of the study was to assess the effect of water birth on obstetrical outcome, the maternal and neonatal infection rate in a selected low risk group. Women's were divided into three group: woman who had a water birth, a normal vaginal delivery after immersion and a normal vaginal delivery without immersion. Outcome measurements were maternal and fetal infection rate, Obstetrical outcome parameters and relevant laboratory parameters. The maternal and neonatal infection rate and laboratory parameters showed no significant difference among the groups. There was no maternal infection related to water birth. Significant differences were observed in obstetrical outcome parameters: less use of analgesia, shorter duration of first and second stage of labour and small episiotomy rate. The conclusion of the study was that water birth is a valuable alternative to traditional delivery. The maternal and fetal infection rate was comparable to traditional deliveries.

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