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## Water and labour pain: Does getting into a bathtub or jacuzzi help?



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Many birth centres and hospitals offer women the opportunity to get into water in labour. They will have a bathtub or jacuzzi in the delivery suite, often called a birthing pool. The choice of whether or not to get in the birthing pool is left to the woman. People who are strongly 'for' birthing pools say it will be a relief for the woman. What's more, they say that a bath will reduce the pain and help prevent perineal tears. But others are concerned that if there is an emergency, important time can be lost getting the woman out of the bath. They also worry about complications for the baby, for example from breathing in water if they are born in the tub.

To answer these questions, researchers gathered together and systematically evaluated trials that tested the effect of birthing pools. This search for evidence showed that the potential advantages and disadvantages of giving birth in water have not yet been studied well enough to allow a confident judgment to be made.

However, the researchers found eleven trials altogether, in which women did not give birth in water but spent some time in water during labour.

The results indicate that getting in a tub can help some women. One small trial showed that about 2 out of 10 women who spent time in water before birth experienced their contractions as less painful than women who did not get in the water. Six other trials involving about 2,400 participants looked at whether taking a bath in labour influenced whether women needed an epidural or similar pain-relieving measures. The results: 62 out of 100 women (62%) who spent time in a bath did not need pain-relieving measures like this, compared to 58 out of 100 women (58%) who did not spend time in the bath. In other words, 4 less women out of 100 needed an epidural or similar pain relief if they spent some time in a bath before giving birth. You can read more about epidurals here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/epidurals.262.56.en.html>)

There was no reduction in episiotomy or perineal tears though. The rate of caesarean sections and births assisted with forceps was not reduced by spending time in water during labour either.

Babies did not seem to be harmed by their mothers spending time in water during labour. However, the possibility that a baby could develop an infection cannot be excluded by the available evidence.

The studies also showed that women are divided about birthing pools. In one of the studies, for example, about half the women who were offered the birthing pool chose not to use it.

You will find more detailed information about coping with pain during labour here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/birth.130.56.en.html>)

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## Glossary

### evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

### infection

In medicine, we speak of an infection when a person has caught a germ (an infectious agent). This germ can be a bacterium, a virus, a fungus or a worm. The germ multiplies and then either spreads throughout the body or only attacks one particular organ. As long as there are no signs of a disease, this is called an asymptomatic infection. When the body shows a reaction to the germ in the form of symptoms, this is called a symptomatic infection (an infectious disease). The period between the moment the germs enter the body and the moment the first symptoms of the disease appear, is called the incubation period. It may last a few hours or days, or even many years. An infection does not necessarily have to lead to the onset of a disease.

## Sources

Cluett ER, Burns E. Immersion in water in labour and birth. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2009*, Issue 2.  
[Cochrane summary (URL: <http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD000111/frame.html>) ]

## **The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)**

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

## **Evidence basis of our health information**

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at [\*\*www.informedhealthonline.org\*\*](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

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