

Water births: Serenity versus safety

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One of the most popular trends in alternative birthing is water birth.

Water is said to diminish pain during labor by relieving the natural burdens of gravity and enabling women to weightlessly change positions. The warmth and jets of a whirlpool bath have long been acknowledged by the medical establishment as being a source of natural pain relief.

The advantages touted by proponents include that the trip through the birth canal is believed to be smoother, placing less stress on the perineal area, the warm water is comforting to mother and child, and as a result the child's welcome into the world is less abrasive than bright lights and cold air.

That said, there are many critics of actually giving birth underwater. Even proponents admit there are risks. They are: a risk of drowning if the baby were to aspirate (breathe in) water; lack of oxygen due to prolonged underwater immersion; risks of a water embolism; hemorrhage due to warm waters preventing blood clotting after birth; and also a small risk of infection.

Fortunately for the families who choose water births, these risks are small. According to the June 2005 issue of the British Medical Journal (BMJ), babies instinctively should not breathe until confronted with air unless they are asphyxiated due to umbilical oxygen depression. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists also pointed out that women who enter the tub before a woman has dilated to 5 centimeters, can be lengthening their labors due to warm waters relaxing their progression along with the pressure and pain. According to the BMJ, in 1991 there were three water birth facilities in the United States; by 2002 there were 200 and the numbers continue to grow. Mad River Hospital, which used to have a water birth facility, has been working for nearly two years to bring back this service to women who are interested in water birth in a hospital setting.

"We are interested in what women want," said Patricia Abler, nurse manager for the Mad River birth center. "We used to have water births but there were some problems with cleaning the tubs. So we put it on hold and now we are looking at reintroducing them in about two months."

Abler said she is working closely with Sutter Davis Hospital in Davis because they have a successful, well-established facility. One concern is that women are not able to wear the fetal monitor that tells nurses when the baby is in distress. The invention of equipment like telemetry monitors -- a new wireless alternative -- allows women to walk around freely and sit in a warm tub.

Full Circle Center for Integrative Medicine owner Dr. Connie Basch is board certified in both family practice and holistic medicine. Basch said she has delivered a lot of babies at Mad River Hospital, and says she has been advocating for water births. Basch stressed that under the hospital protocol, there would be no risk of aspiration because as soon as the baby is born it is immediately brought out of the water.

"At first I thought, 'We're not dolphins,'" she said. "But there are tremendous studies and data that support water birth as a safe option."

The majority of water births happen at home. Lay midwife Kate Maguire said that 60 percent to 70 percent of women in her practice rent tubs to have water births. Maguire said many women use the tubs for a comfortable place to labor and then get out of the tub before the baby comes.

Garberville resident and mom of 11-month-old Haven, Anne Fricke said her experience with a water birth was "amazing" and she would do it again.

"I knew I wanted a home birth and read that it was easier on the woman and a smoother transition for the baby," Fricke said. "I definitely noticed a difference when I got in the tub. The intensity was still there but my contractions seemed shorter."

Between the water and the home birth experience, Fricke said she felt the focus was more on the family and less on the event being viewed as a medical procedure.

"The midwife hung back and let us have our experience but was off to the side watching and making sure everything was OK," she said. "It was just a beautiful and sweet family moment."