



Water Therapy as a Powerful Tool during Labor and Birth

Mercy Family Birthing Center, Nampa, Idaho

Safe, effective pain relief is high on the priority list for most pregnant women. Warm water (hydrotherapy) is an inexpensive, readily available tool for reducing labor pain.

In the United States, birthing care for many has become a high technology event. This is certainly appropriate and helpful for the small percentage of women with complicated pregnancies and births. But what about the average healthy woman who is looking for non-drug techniques for getting through labor? Hydrotherapy may be just the answer she's looking for!

Here's how it works: getting into a tub of warm water promotes relaxation. This allows the brain to secrete substances called endorphins, the body's natural pain relievers. Thus a comfort cycle is begun. Additionally, the buoyancy provided by warm water promotes good circulation, freedom of movement and labor-enhancing positions. Muscle spasms and "the labor shakes" are relieved in warm water. Hydrotherapy may promote labor progress, shortening the time spent in active labor. Warm water relaxes the pelvic floor so the baby may emerge more easily. Overall, laboring in water may enhance a mother's ability to be in control of the process, an empowering experience.

Successful use of hydrotherapy can help a mother avoid the use of pain-relieving drugs during labor. The baby then does not have to deal with the side effects of maternal drugs. At Mercy Family Birthing Center, where nearly all mothers use hydrotherapy at some point, more than 90% of mothers use no pain-relieving drugs during labor.

For the newborn, warm fluid is the element most familiar and comfortable. Many babies exhibit obvious enjoyment of remaining in the water for a few minutes after birth. They appear alert, responsive, and not at all intimidated by the water, in contrast to the startled movements frequently observed in air-born babies. Some authorities think a gentle beginning such as this will promote feelings of security and positive adjustment to the environment on a larger scale.

The Mechanics of Water Labor and Birth

The birthing room is warm and homey, quiet with subdued/adjustable lighting. Music may be used if desired. The birthing mother may choose her attendants and may move freely around the room and throughout the facility, trying various positions and tools for comfort and labor progress.

Large jetted tubs are available for use during labor in 3 of the 4 birthing rooms. The 4th room houses an oversize rectangular waterbirth pool beneath a ceiling-mounted mirror. For all tubs, the water temperature is maintained at 95-100 degrees, near body temperature. Patients are usually encouraged to wait until labor is well established to enter the tubs. Some women remain in the tub throughout active labor, while others prefer to get out from time to time. A

mother may choose to give birth in the water or in the bed, and may labor and birth in the positions of her choice.

Support persons are as many or few as the birthing mother prefers. Her coach may sit on the edge of the tub or kneel next to it. The birthing pool is large enough for a woman and her coach together if they desire. For the birth, the doctor sits or kneels at tub side and reaches in to assist as needed.

Monitoring the labor: The personal nurse is present to support the laboring mother, assess progress, evaluate the well being of the baby, and keep the family comfortable. She encourages the mother to drink fluids and eat light foods, and consults with the doctor as needed. Monitoring the baby's heartbeat is accomplished by intermittent use of a hand-held doppler. If any problems are detected, the laboring mother is asked to leave the tub so more comprehensive assessment can be achieved.

Birth in the water: The baby's head is eased out with support given by the doctor or the mother herself. The baby does not breathe until it reaches the outside air, and oxygen requirements are still being met by the placenta through the umbilical cord. The baby is birthed through the water to the mother's waiting arms. The mouth and nose are suctioned briefly and the infant is allowed to unfold slowly and gradually while partially submerged in the warm water. After a few moments of joyous celebration, the cord is cut, the baby is lifted out of the water, wrapped in a pre-warmed towel and handed to a family member. Delivery of the placenta is accomplished after the mother moves to the bed, just a few steps away. Breastfeeding is initiated after the mother has had juice and a snack.

Mothers who have used hydrotherapy for labor or birth have verbalized great satisfaction in their choice. Here are comments from some of our Birthing Center mothers:

"I personally feel that we are extremely lucky to have such an advanced Birthing Center here in Nampa. I have had all three of my children in the water, and I feel I'm the luckiest woman in the world!"

"The Birthing Center was very quiet and private and felt safe. Just me, my husband, the nurse and doctor. It felt like a home birth, but with more safety and back-up in case of emergency. I liked the birthing ball, the encouragement that it's all normal, and especially the big tub! I would absolutely do a water birth again!"

"The most helpful techniques in labor were relaxing in the jetted tub, and then using the birthing ball when labor got tougher. What did I like best? No drugs! Being able to go home soon after the birth of our baby."

Warm water has powerful soothing properties for women to utilize in meeting the challenges of labor and birth. Once a woman has labored or birthed in water, she usually does not want to have another baby without it. Such an empowering experience becomes a source of great personal strength that enriches her life and her mothering experience.

Hazel Young, R.N., C.C.E.

Mercy Family Birthing Center is featured on www.hometownbaby.com
For additional information: www.waterbirth.org