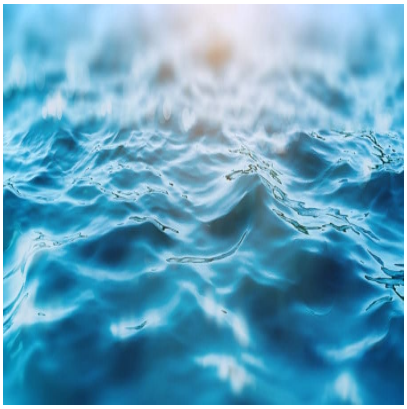

Description

Making Waves – Improving Access to Water Immersion in Maternity Units

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The evidence

Water immersion for labour and/or birth can be a supportive low-cost, low-tech intervention that enhances women's experiences of their labour and with positive outcome benefits. In a previous article,[1] we highlighted the current evidence in favour of water immersion that demonstrated the positive impact upon women's and birthing people's physical and psychological outcomes, including; reducing pain perception, epidural use, labour duration and hospital transfers; enhancing mobility, freedom of movement, feelings of safety, privacy and positive experiences of labour and birth. Overall, water immersion enhances the neuroendocrinology of a normal physiological labour[2] and is a helpful option for pain relief.[3]

Barriers to access

However, despite these benefits, access to birthing pools can be inconsistent.[4] For example, birthing pools are much less likely to be used in obstetric units than freestanding birth centres or at home, for the same cohort of women.[5] Issues of maternity professionals' lack of exposure, competence and confidence to facilitating intrapartum care in the water are known barriers.[1,4] These barriers can be reflective of cultural biases, fear, and organisational restrictive policies[6] – however, such concerns do not bear out in the evidence in favour of water immersion. As such, it is incumbent on maternity units to overcome these barriers to offer water immersion as a meaningful choice.

Improving access

Here are some tips to get you thinking about how to improve water access at your maternity unit:

- Carry out a baseline audit to determine your current rates of water use. You may need to adapt your data collection to ensure you are collecting information for labour, birth and/or placental birth as separate entities.
- Then, consider adopting a 'water champion' approach. Identify those experienced and passionate for water facilitation who can be a source of expert knowledge and support for others.
- Raise the profile of water immersion to all staff and service users; consider the use of an information board with vibrant pictures and key facts.
- Ensure the pool room is kept free and available for those wishing to use the pool.

- Offer training and update sessions to all maternity staff, using online videos as resources, our previous articles and the online estiMATE blood loss training tool to support education.[7]
- Ensure water immersion is embedded into antenatal classes and information sheets provided during the antenatal period.
- Consider hiring out birthing pools in the community to reduce the cost for individuals.
- Organise regular MDT meetings to raise awareness, share positive stories, troubleshoot concerns and invite women to speak about their waterbirths.
- Where possible (and appropriate, with consent) invite obstetricians and neonatologists to quietly observe a waterbirth.
- Ensure all staff are competent with intermittent auscultation, usual labour care and how to manage emergencies during a water birth.
- Finally, continue to audit regularly to see how your methods are working.

Conclusion

Water immersion for labour and birth can be hugely rewarding for women, birthing people and staff alike. However, it is essential that midwives seek out the opportunities to feel confident and competent in offering water intrapartum care. Moreover, hospitals from an organisational level must collectively support this choice so more people have access to this option. It is a vital component of respectful and dignified maternity care. **TPM**

For more information about facilitating water births, contact: Croyde Medical

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