

FAQs about using inflatable paddling pools for birth

At True Blue, we have received many questions from both midwives and mothers about the suitability and safety of using kiddies' pools for labour and birth.

In this article water birth pioneers and experts answer some important questions that have been raised recently regarding the use of inflatable paddling pools (designed for use in the garden) as birthing pools.

Two decades ago, people wanting a water birth at home sometimes thought of such measures as hiring a small skip and lining it with plastic! Dr Michel Odent - renowned water birth pioneer, originally used an inflatable kiddies' paddling pool until this was replaced by a custom made birthing pool. In the following statement, he highlights this history and refers to some of the most obvious advantages of a pool made of hard materials:

*"Paddling pools have an historical interest where childbirth is concerned. We must recall that in the 1970s the only hospital birthing pool available was a paddling pool at the Pithiviers General Hospital in France. The first birthing pool in hard material was eventually delivered to that hospital in May 1982 (thanks to a sum of money offered by a Japanese TV company). At that time the transmission of viral diseases such as Hepatitis B and AIDS was not an issue. The Pithiviers team immediately noticed that the main obvious advantage of the pool in hard material was its **depth**: it could be completely filled without any risk of inundating the room when the woman in labour was leaning forward on the edge of the pool". Michel Odent August 2007, Paddling pools for birth... cheaper maybe - but are they safe?*

Here are some commonly asked questions with our answers.

Is there a danger of puncture?

The material paddling pools are made of is not considered durable enough for labour or birth and can be damaged by hot water. These pools generally have a plug in the base designed to empty the pool in a garden and are not for indoor use. There is no such thing as a safe inflatable unless made of very specific material, and leakage or flooding due to puncture or tipping over is always a risk. This can cause damage to the home or hospital unit and disappointment during labour.

Are paddling pools hygienic?

Hard portable birthing pools are specifically designed to prevent infection with a double liner system. The disposable inner liner is recommended to be opened only in established labour and is used only by one woman. Thanks to this system, approved by hospital bacteriologists and used by all reputable pool hire companies, there has been effective infection control for many years and safe standards have been established for the use of birthing pools at home.

If the paddling pool is used for labour and birth without a liner there is increased risk of infection - particularly in the case of re-use after a practice run, children entering the pool prior to labour, re-use after storage and possible second hand use.

Why are firm sides important?

Although some inflatable pools claim to be firm enough for an adult to sit on, they would not be considered reliably firm enough when:

- The partner needs to sit on the rim to support the mother as she gives birth
- The midwife requires the woman to sit on the rim to assist the birth
- In an emergency such as shoulder dystocia or fainting

Firm sides, reliably strong enough for the mother to lean on, or to use in the above circumstances are a primary consideration in birth pool design.

Are inflatable pools deep/ large enough?

A birthing pool needs to be deep enough to fully cover the mother's belly when kneeling or squatting in the pool, leaving her shoulders exposed to be able to lose heat, and simultaneously high enough to protect the midwife's back when bending over the pool. These measurements are carefully calculated in the design of birthing pools and are not a feature of paddling pools. It has been observed that for many women, the inflatable paddling pools on offer are not large enough to offer stable support or sufficient depth when kneeling, or sufficient length to lie along the pool with belly immersed. This can result in the mother floating on her back on the surface of the water, which may feel comfortable for a limited amount of time, but does not encourage good blood flow to the placenta. In addition, as the uterus needs to tilt forward in order work most effectively, this position can result in the mother experiencing a higher degree of discomfort. Movement and support in active upright positions is also limited in these pools by comparison with pools designed specifically for free movement in upright positions.

How easy is it to assemble or empty a paddling pool?

A large enough paddling pool will need to be inflated with a good pump, which may need to be purchased and can be costly. It can take a surprisingly long time to inflate the pool and considerable effort. This needs to be done when the mother is in established labour to minimize the risk of infection. A firm sided pool can be assembled ahead of time, with only the inner liner needing to be put in place when in established labour.

An inflatable pool that is not provided with a submersible pump will need to be emptied with buckets by hand and is very difficult to clean indoors and impossible to sterilize. Deflating these pools also takes considerable time.

What essential items are supplied by pool hire companies in addition to the pool?

- Hose and a tap adapter - there is a danger of infection if a garden hose that is not thoroughly cleaned used to fill the pool.
- A reliable water thermometer. Temperature regulation is essential for safety.
- A submersible water pump to empty the pool - otherwise you need to use a bucket to empty a large quantity of soiled water after the birth.
- A disposable liner if the pool has been used previously or is to be used again - the liners are designed to fit rented pools and may not fit paddling pools.

By the time you have found and purchased all the necessary accessories that are recommended for hygiene, safety and convenience at a water birth, you would probably be much better off hiring a pool kit, especially designed for labour and birth from a reliable supplier and will not necessarily have saved a great deal of money.

Could the use of paddling pools have a negative impact on home water births?

There are a variety of excellent portable water birth pools available for hire that have been used successfully throughout the US, Canada and UK since the late 1980s. A lot of thought and work has gone into making them safe and reliable for use in the home environment. This was done in collaboration with midwives, obstetricians and hospital bacteriologists and has made water birth in portable pools safe for all women.

If incidents occur relating to flooding, infection or inadequate temperature control due to the use of paddling pools, could this potentially jeopardise pool use for all women in the longer term?

It has taken many years to collate sufficient research to convince those who may be skeptical of water birth, that this is a safe option that can have short and long-term benefits to mothers and babies and to encourage midwives to attend water births who may have had reservations. The widespread use of cheap inflatables could undermine the efforts of those who have worked to establish the option of water birth at home for women throughout the country.

What are the main benefits of hiring a custom designed birth pool?

Reputable pool hire companies provide clean equipment with everything necessary for safety, comfort and hygiene. Their service also includes advice, support and guidance that goes way beyond just hiring the equipment. There are remarkable benefits to be gained when labouring in a pool that has been specifically designed to have the right dimensions to provide buoyancy, to accommodate any size woman and provide for quick position changes.

Whilst there are some women who are happy they have had their baby born in water without the cost of hiring a water birth pool, many professionals feel they are missing out on what could be a much better experience. Once the physical, physiological and psychological benefits of being in a properly designed birth pool are understood, most women and midwives will agree that for such an important event, it is safest and possibly even more economical to use the best, most thoughtful birth pool available.

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