

# Vaginal Birth and Cesarean Birth: How Do the Risks Compare?

Companion chart to the booklet

*What Every Pregnant Woman Needs  
to Know About Cesarean Section*

MATERNITY CENTER ASSOCIATION

*be informed*

*know your rights*

*protect yourself*

*protect your baby*

# Vaginal Birth and Cesarean Birth: How Do the Risks Compare?

The information in this chart and in the companion booklet, *What Every Pregnant Woman Needs to Know About Cesarean Section*, is based on an extensive review of current research. These resources were developed to help women make informed decisions about cesarean section.

The review found that “spontaneous” vaginal birth (with neither vacuum extraction nor forceps) involves many fewer risks than either cesarean section or “assisted” vaginal birth (with vacuum extraction or forceps). Without a clear and compelling need for a cesarean or for assisted delivery, a spontaneous vaginal birth is likely to be the safest way to give birth.

## 1. CONCERNS ABOUT HAVING A CESAREAN SECTION

*Having a cesarean section rather than a vaginal birth increases risk for the problems listed below.*

### **RISKS FOR MOTHERS AROUND THE TIME OF BIRTH**

- maternal death
- emergency hysterectomy
- blood clots and stroke
- injuries from surgery
- longer time in hospital
- going back into hospital
- infection
- pain, overall and at site of wound
- poor birth experience
- less early contact with baby
- unfavorable reaction to baby
- depression (difference found for some but not all studies)
- psychological trauma (difference found for unplanned cesarean)
- poor overall mental health and self-esteem
- poor overall functioning

### **ONGOING RISKS FOR MOTHERS**

- pelvic pain
- bowel obstruction

### **FUTURE REPRODUCTIVE RISKS FOR MOTHERS**

- infertility: want to become pregnant and cannot
- infertility: have less desire to be pregnant and choose to avoid
- maternal death
- ectopic pregnancy
- placenta previa
- placenta accreta
- placental abruption
- rupture of the uterus

### **RISKS FOR BABIES AROUND THE TIME OF BIRTH**

- accidental surgical cuts
- respiratory problems
- not breastfeeding

### **ONGOING RISK FOR BABIES**

- asthma, in childhood and adulthood

### **RISKS FOR BABIES IN FUTURE PREGNANCIES**

- stillbirth or death shortly after birth
- low birth weight and preterm birth
- malformation
- central nervous system injury

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## 2. CONCERNS ABOUT HAVING AN ASSISTED VAGINAL BIRTH

*Having a vaginal birth with either vacuum extraction or forceps rather than a “spontaneous” vaginal birth without these procedures increases risk for the problems listed below.*

### RISKS FOR MOTHERS

- tear in perineum going into or through anal muscle
- excessive bleeding and transfusion
- going back into the hospital
- infection
- painful vaginal area
- poor birth experience
- bowel problems
- urinary incontinence
- anal incontinence
- hemorrhoids
- sexual problems
- psychological trauma
- poor overall functioning

### RISKS FOR BABIES

- brain injury
- other birth injury

## 3. CONCERNS ABOUT HAVING A VAGINAL BIRTH

*Having a vaginal birth rather than a cesarean increases risk for problems listed below. Differences tend to be greater for assisted delivery (with vacuum extraction or forceps) and less for spontaneous vaginal birth (without these procedures).*

### RISKS FOR MOTHERS

- painful vaginal area
- urinary incontinence
- anal incontinence

*In most instances, these problems resolve during the recovery period after birth. Many can be prevented with conservative use of certain maternity practices (such as episiotomy). See booklet for more information about these matters (pages 7 and 27-28) and for tips to reduce risk (pages 13-18).*

### RISK FOR BABIES

- brachial plexus birth injury

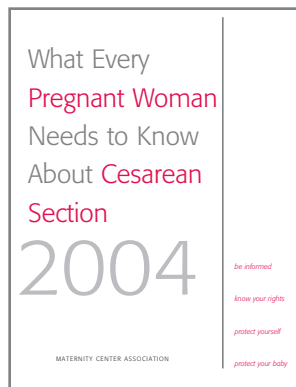
*In most instances, this injury resolves soon after or within weeks of birth. In a small proportion of babies with this problem, a weakness with lifting the arms persists.*

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# About the Booklet *What Every Pregnant Woman Needs to Know About Cesarean Section*

To help women make informed decisions about cesarean section, this booklet discusses: the importance of these issues for *all* pregnant women, women's right to "informed consent" and "informed refusal," situations that can lead to a cesarean, and evidence-based tips for use in pregnancy and in labor to help avoid unnecessary cesarean section and assisted vaginal birth. An appendix to the booklet describes the problems listed in this chart and estimates the difference that the type of birth makes to the likelihood that a woman will experience each problem.

This booklet was developed by the Maternity Center Association, the oldest national organization advocating on behalf of childbearing women in the United States, in partnership with many professional and consumer groups. It has been endorsed by over 20 national non-profit organizations.



*This booklet is available in two forms: as a bound, color version with an at-a-glance insert comparing the risks of vaginal and cesarean birth, and as a PDF file. You can order both forms by visiting [www.maternitywise.org/cesareanbooklet/](http://www.maternitywise.org/cesareanbooklet/), by emailing [info@maternitywise.org](mailto:info@maternitywise.org) or by calling 212-777-5000.*

*To learn more about the process and sources used to draw conclusions, go to [www.maternitywise.org/cesareanbooklet/](http://www.maternitywise.org/cesareanbooklet/).*



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