
Position Statement: Elective Cesarean Sections Riskier than Vaginal Birth for Babies and Mothers

by Jill MacCorkle, ICAN Clarion Editor

Recently, a few physicians have claimed that elective primary cesareans and elective repeat cesareans are safer for babies, and even for mothers, than vaginal birth.^{1,2} While selective use of the medical literature might seem to back up this claim, a review of the studies which consider short- and long-term risks of cesareans does not. Elective cesareans put babies and mothers at risk, use valuable and limited healthcare resources, have negative psychological and financial consequences for families, and substantially increase serious risks in subsequent pregnancies. The high rate of cesarean in the United States has not resulted in improved outcomes for babies or mothers. Additionally, vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC) is still less risky for mothers and babies than cesarean section, despite recent claims to the contrary. ICAN is opposed to cesarean sections performed without true medical indication.

Risks to the baby from elective cesarean section

- Babies delivered by elective cesarean have an increased risk of neonatal respiratory distress syndrome (RDS), a life-threatening condition,³⁻⁷ and other respiratory problems that may require NICU care.
- Babies delivered by elective cesarean have a five-fold increase in persistent pulmonary hypertension (PPH) over those born vaginally.⁶
- Babies delivered by elective cesarean are at increased risk of iatrogenic (physician-caused) prematurity, usually related to failure to conform to protocols for determining gestational age prior to delivery, or errors in estimating weeks of gestation even with the use of clinical data.^{7,8} Prematurity can have life-long effects on health and well-being, and even mild to moderate preterm births have serious health consequences.⁹
- Babies delivered by elective cesarean are cut by the surgeon's scalpel from two to six percent of the time.¹⁰ Researchers believe these risks to be underreported.

Risks to the mother from elective cesarean section

- Up to 30% of women who have a cesarean acquire a postpartum infection. Infections are the most common maternal complication after cesarean section and account for substantial postnatal morbidity and prolonged hospital stay.¹¹

- Other serious complications for women undergoing cesarean include massive hemorrhage,¹² transfusions,¹³ ureter injury,¹⁴ injury to bowels,¹⁵ and incisional endometriosis.^{16,17}
- Women who undergo cesarean report much lower levels of health and well-being at seven weeks postpartum than women who have vaginal births.¹⁸
- Women who undergo cesarean section have twice the risk of rehospitalization for reasons such as infection, gallbladder disease, surgical wound complications, cardiopulmonary conditions, thromboembolic conditions, and appendicitis. Rehospitalization has a negative social and financial effect on the family.¹⁹
- Women who undergo cesarean section report less satisfaction than women having vaginal births.^{20,21}
- Women undergoing cesarean are at increased risk of hysterectomy in both the current and future pregnancies.^{22,23}
- The maternal death rate is twice as high for elective cesarean as for vaginal birth.²⁴
- In subsequent pregnancies, women with a prior cesarean have higher rates of serious placental abnormalities which endanger the life and health of the baby and the mother.²⁵⁻²⁷ Women are rarely told that a cesarean places future babies at higher risk.
- After cesarean section, women face higher rates of secondary infertility as well as higher rates of miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy.^{28,29}

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