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C-Section vs. Natural Birth: Explained By A Neonatal Nurse

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Childbirth is one of the most intensely transformative events you can experience physically and emotionally. Whether you deliver by [Cesarean](#) section (c-section) or have a [vaginal](#) (natural) birth, your experience may be simultaneously challenging and joyful. Your delivery method - c-section or natural birth - can depend on medical, personal, or cultural factors. **This article will help you [prepare](#) for your delivery by describing the differences between a c-section vs natural vaginal birth.**

Understanding C-Section and Vaginal Birth

A c-section is a surgical procedure used to deliver your baby through incisions in your abdomen and uterus. C-sections can be [planned](#) before you begin labor.

Q: When are c-sections necessary?

A: A c-section is necessary if **your baby is in a [breech](#) position, you have had a c-section before, you are having multiples, or there is a problem with your placenta** that would make delivering vaginally dangerous for you or your baby, such as [placenta previa](#).

Unplanned c-sections can happen if labor has slowed or stopped. You may have several hours to discuss this option with your OB care provider. An [emergency c-section](#) may be performed quickly if your baby develops fetal distress or your health is at risk.

C-sections can be [elective](#), meaning you choose this delivery method without a medical reason.

Q: How dilated do you have to be before having a c-section?

A: Because your baby will not pass through your cervix, **you don't have to be dilated to have a c-section.**

When you deliver via c-section, a longer stay in the hospital is to be expected, typically 2 to 4 days. Because this is a major surgery, a full [recovery](#) can take 4 to 6 weeks.

A vaginal delivery is when your baby is born through your vagina. It is the most common delivery method and is often the first choice for expecting moms. **The term “natural” is used to describe vaginal births with few if any medical interventions.** Relaxation techniques are used instead of pain medication. As your uterus contracts, your cervix thins and dilates, allowing your baby to be pushed through the birth canal. A **Vaginal Birth After C-Section (VBAC)** is possible if certain conditions are met. About 60-80% of mothers who try VBACS successfully deliver their babies vaginally.

Whether you are planning to have a c-section or natural birth, you will know you are getting ready to meet your baby when you notice early signs of labor such as losing your mucous plug or your water breaking.

Here is a side-by-side comparison of the key differences between having a c-section vs natural birth.

C-Section vs. Natural Birth: Pain

Q: What is more painful, a c-section or a natural birth?

A: Various methods of anesthesia are used during c-sections, so **you don’t feel pain during the procedure**, but you will have post-surgery pain after this medication wears off. **Pain is to be expected during natural vaginal deliveries** and if you decide to use pain medication, there are several options. In the United States, epidurals are the most common type of labor pain relief. If you deliver vaginally, you can expect to have vaginal soreness for a week or two. If you have a vaginal tear, you may have discomfort for several weeks. **Whether you have a natural birth vs a c-section, recovery will be made easier with an individualized plan developed by you and your doctor.** This will help you manage your pain for the days and weeks following your delivery.

C-Section vs. Natural Birth: Safety

Q: Are c-sections safer than natural births?

A: This depends on individual circumstances. If you or your baby have conditions that indicate a c-section is necessary, the benefits may outweigh the risks.

If there are no reasons to avoid a vaginal delivery, this delivery method may be more advantageous for you and your baby.

C-Section vs. Natural Birth: Delivery Time

Q: When will I get to meet my baby?

A: For first-time moms who spontaneously go into labor, **it usually lasts 12 to 24 hours**. For subsequent deliveries, the average is 8 to 10 hours. **For c-sections, after you have received anesthesia, your baby is usually born within 5-10 minutes.** The remainder of the surgery lasts about 40 minutes if your delivery is uncomplicated.

C-Section vs. Natural Birth: Pros and Cons

Q: What are the pros and cons of natural birth?

A: Pros of Natural Birth:

- Recovery time is shorter.
- You can avoid the risks related to having surgery.
- Babies delivered vaginally have a lower risk of breathing problems and are typically able to be held skin-to-skin right away.

Cons of Natural Birth:

- Delivering vaginally puts you at risk for vaginal tears that require stitches.
- Stretching of the pelvic floor muscles increases the likelihood of developing incontinence.
- Your labor may last longer and you may experience more pain during labor and delivery.

Q: What are the pros and cons of c-sections?

A: Pros of C-Sections:

- It is the safer delivery method if specific problems arise during labor, or if you or your baby meet certain conditions.
- If your c-section is planned, you can avoid experiencing the unpredictability of labor.
- You will receive some type of anesthesia, so you won’t feel pain.

Cons of C-Sections:

- It can be more challenging to take care of your baby while recovering from major abdominal surgery and you may need more help.
- While infection and excessive bleeding are possible with both delivery methods, c-sections put you at a higher risk for these issues.

- Future pregnancy may have an increased chance of complications, such as placenta previa.

Preparing for Delivery

A [birth plan](#) is a list of preferences you have for labor, delivery, and recovery. While it is not a requirement, many mothers find it helpful to think about these preferences ahead of time. **Because of the unpredictable nature of labor, you may want to have a birth plan for both delivery methods.**

As you [gather the essentials](#) for bringing home your baby, you can start preparing for your c-section or natural birth by creating a hospital [bag checklist](#) and postpartum care kit. This can help prepare you for being away from home and aid in your physical and emotional recovery. The hospital will provide pads, one-size-fits-all disposable underwear, and basic toiletries, but be sure to bring things like nourishing snacks, a refillable water bottle, aromatherapy oils and a good book.

Postpartum Recovery

Congratulations! Now you can focus on caring for your baby and your postpartum recovery. **Read this article to learn about [postpartum recovery tips](#) for sleep, diet and exercise, and navigating emotions.**

In addition to the changes your body undergoes, [pregnancy reshapes your brain](#). Areas responsible for memory and new learning are affected. These changes enhance your ability to make decisions, manage your emotions, and bond with your baby. Understanding "[mommy brain](#)" can help normalize your experience of sleep deprivation, hormonal changes, and stress from new responsibilities.

As you adjust to your new life, the [MamaRoo® Multi-Motion Baby Swing™](#) can be a crucial support tool that your baby will love. The MamaRoo mimics natural parental movements, offering relief when you need an extra set of arms. Read this article about a [NICU Nurse's perspective](#) on just how helpful the Mamaroo can be.

Knowing the differences between delivery methods and afterwards, natural birth vs c-section recovery, can help you prepare for both birth scenarios. **As you continue to get ready for the day you meet your baby, you can learn more by checking out additional resources such as [The Mother Baby Center](#).** Be sure to talk with your OB care team of healthcare professionals for support and personalized guidance on your journey into parenthood.

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