

North Carolina Women's Hospital **ELECTIVE PRIMARY CESAREAN DELIVERY**

What is an Elective Primary Cesarean Delivery (c-section)?

A primary elective cesarean delivery is a c-section done for a woman who has never before had a cesarean delivery and who requests that her baby be born through the abdomen. Cesarean deliveries are usually only done when there are medical concerns that either labor or continuing labor will be risky for the mother or baby. To have an elective primary cesarean delivery, an obstetrician must agree to do the surgery when there are no clear medical indications. Other names for elective primary cesarean delivery are “patient choice cesarean” and “cesarean on demand.”

Are There Benefits to an Elective Primary Cesarean Delivery?

Although choosing elective major abdominal surgery is not usually recommended, some women consider having their baby through the abdomen because they think it has advantages over vaginal birth. Some women do not want to experience labor, others want to time the birth for personal reasons and others are concerned that experiencing a vaginal birth will increase their chances of leaking urine (urinary incontinence) and leaking gas or stool (anal incontinence). While some studies suggest that women who have vaginal births have more of these problems, there is still no clear answer about what causes incontinence. Women who have only had cesarean deliveries can also develop problems with incontinence.

Are There Risks to an Elective Primary Cesarean Delivery?

For most women, a cesarean delivery has more risks than a vaginal delivery. The two most common immediate risks are blood loss for the mother, which could require blood transfusions or a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus), and infections, which require antibiotics. Less common risks are injury to the bladder, the ureters (the tubes that connect the kidneys to the bladder) and the intestines. Some women develop a weakness in the abdominal wall (hernia) following abdominal surgery, which may require another surgery. Usually general anesthesia is not used for elective cesarean delivery but any anesthesia has risks. All major surgeries include a small risk of death. Finally, recovery from a cesarean delivery is longer than from a vaginal birth because the procedure is a major surgery.

For babies, a major risk of cesarean delivery without labor is breathing problems. Unborn infants have fluid in their lungs. Labor contractions help move this fluid out of the lungs so that they can easily take the first breaths after birth. Without contractions, babies may have difficulties breathing and may need to be admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit for careful monitoring. The risk of breathing problems for babies born by cesarean delivery is lower if the baby is born within one week of its expected due date. Breastfeeding has also been reported to be more difficult following a cesarean delivery.

Are There Risks of an Elective Primary Cesarean Delivery in Future Pregnancies?

A woman who has had a cesarean delivery has an increased chance of having problems with her placenta in her next pregnancies. The three most common problems are a low lying placenta (placenta previa); a placenta that separates from the wall of the uterus during the pregnancy or labor (placental abruption) and a placenta that sticks to the area where the previous cut into the uterus was made (placenta accreta). All of these problems, while rare, are very serious for the mother and the baby and may cause death.

Another risk is rupture of the uterus during a future labor. If a woman has had one previous cesarean delivery, the risk is 1 in 100 that she will experience uterine rupture if she attempts a vaginal birth. This risk increases with the number of cesarean deliveries a woman has had. Uterine rupture is a life-threatening medical emergency for both the mother and the baby. A woman who has had two abdominal deliveries and no vaginal deliveries will be advised that any future children should be delivered by cesarean.

What Should I Do if I Want More Information about My Choices Regarding Labor and Delivery?

Talk to your physician or midwife if you want more information about the risks and benefits of a vaginal birth and of an elective cesarean delivery. If you and your provider agree that an elective primary cesarean delivery is an option for you and your baby, you will need to sign a consent form that indicates this is your choice and that you understand the risks of this elective surgery for both you and your baby.

If you choose to have an elective primary cesarean delivery, you will also need to meet with our financial counselors. Because this type of cesarean delivery would be done without the usual medical or obstetrical indications, it is possible that your insurance company will not cover the additional costs. If this is the case, you will need to establish a payment plan. When asked, our medical and billing staff at UNC Hospitals will say that there was no medical reason for your choice to have a cesarean delivery.

Approved by UNC Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine for NC Women's Hospital Patient Education Committee, July, 2006.