Question: Should women be allowed to eat and drink during labor?

Answer: Yes. In women who are low risk, it is not harmful to eat or drink during labor.

Evidence: In a Cochrane review, researchers combined evidence from 5 studies that randomly assigned 3,100 low-risk women to nothing by mouth (NPO) or eating and drinking during labor. They found no differences between the two groups with regard to Cesarean sections, instrumental vaginal births, Apgar scores, or any other health issues. The number of women in the studies was too small to look at the rate of aspiration during general anesthesia. Aspiration is when stomach contents go into the lungs. This is an extremely rare health problem that was first reported in the 1940’s. However, since the 1940’s, anesthesia techniques have changed considerably. Also, there is a greater use of epidurals. These two factors have made aspiration during surgery an incredibly rare event.

So what is the risk of aspiration during a C-section?

In one study, researchers looked at 4,097 maternal deaths that happened in the U.S. between 1979 and 1990. They found that the risk of aspiration during a C-section was 0.667 per million women, or approximately 7 events in 10 million births (Hawkins, Koonin et al. 1997).

This means that you are more likely to be struck by lightning than to die from aspiration during a C-section (National Weather Service, 2012).

In another study, researchers looked at 11,814 women who were given the freedom to eat and drink during labor, with some women requiring emergency C-sections. There were zero cases of illness or death reported from aspiration, even though 22% of women had eaten solid food (Rooks, Weatherby et al. 1989).

Many women naturally choose to stop eating the closer they get to delivery.

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The researchers concluded that women have the right to choose whether or not they would like to eat and drink during labor (Singata, Tranmer et al. 2010).

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References


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