

# The watermethod

## Intact preservation of the young deceased fetus

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**What to do with the fetus after a (spontaneous) abortion or immature birth until the funeral or cremation? We will describe a way in which the fetus remains presentable for longer so that the parents can say goodbye to their child.**

### Case 1

A 33-year G3P2 presented at 17 weeks gestation with a IUFD. A CRL was echoscopically measured in accordance with 14+0 weeks and HC in accordance with 14+5 weeks gestation. It was an undisturbed pregnancy until that point with a normal NT measurement.

Labour was induced with misoprostol after preparation with mifepristone at 17 +2 weeks gestation.

The patient indicated that she wanted the fetus to be kept in water after the birth. She hoped that by keeping the fetus in water, it would remain presentable for longer.

According to the patient's wish, the macerated fetus was placed in a transparent plastic container filled with cold tap water immediately after birth (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. Fetus in tap water*

This made it easier for the parents to look at the fetus.

The fetus was kept at home in the fridge until the funeral the following day. Notable, was that the fetus's colour turned from brown to pink during the night. Loose bits of skin were also removed by hand, making him even more photogenic (Fig. 2).



*Fig. 2. Fetus after a night in cold water*

Unfortunately more than half a year later the patient presented with another missed abortion, this time at 14 + 6 weeks, with a fetus with a CRL of 14 + 0 weeks. This pregnancy, too, had been undisturbed up to that point, and nothing untoward had been observed at the 12-week ultrasound.

This fetus was also born following induction with mifepristone and misoprostol and placed in cold tap water after the birth. Given that this fetus was less macerated, the blood vessels were clearly visible at birth. After a few hours in the water they subsided. This fetus was pink at birth and following a night in the fridge only became slightly paler (fig 3).



*Fig. 3. Fetus in accordance with 14 weeks gestation in cold water*

## Case 2

The patient was pregnant with monochorionic diamniotic gemelli. She presented at 16 + 6 weeks gestation with an IUFD of both children, both with hydrops and difference in amniotic fluid. The patient gave birth vaginally following induction with mifepristone and misoprostol to two lifeless boys. Given our experience with the previous patient, the option of placing the children in cold water was discussed with the patient and her partner. They welcomed this (fig. 4).



*Fig 4. Gemelli in accordance with 16 weeks gestation in cold water*

The twins were later, as is the norm in the Netherlands, laid dry in a tray, after which the usual softening and distortion of both fetuses quickly occurred. (Fig. 5).



*Fig 5. Gemelli after being removed from the water*

## Discussion

The (unexpected) loss of an (early) pregnancy is an event that most expectant parents are not prepared for. This can have psychological consequences, such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder or anxiety, which can have a negative effect on later pregnancies<sup>1</sup>.

In their study Säfland et al describe 6 qualities that parents of stillborn children seek in their care providers<sup>2</sup>. One or both parents of 31 stillborn children were interviewed twice about their view and experience on the process after their stillbirths. One of the qualities is help with meeting and saying goodbye to the stillborn child.

In our opinion it means parents can say goodbye to the fetus in his/her most intact form.

Traditionally, deceased fetuses used for education or exhibitions are conserved in so-called 'strong water'. A combination of water with formaldehyde or ethanol. This method is highly suited for viewing and preserving the fetus from all aspects. Due to the increased availability of prenatal diagnostics, (wanted) pregnancies are more often terminated. The gynaecologist will therefore be

increasingly dealing with parents who want to say goodbye to their newborn child. In this situation there is no need to add ethanol or formaldehyde to the water, since the fetus will only be kept for a short time, until the funeral or cremation.

Previously, a fetus was often placed on a cellulose mat, a cardboard basin or on a cloth. The fetus could then really not be moved due to risk of damage. The child's colour would get darker and, for most people, less beautiful and recognizable due to softening and deformation. In macerated children, this effect is much faster and more visible. We have now applied this method of preserving the fetus in this way on numerous occasions. We see good results, the fetuses stay presentable for much longer and if they'd like to, the parents can take pictures. No matter how young, a fetus can be very presentable, even with extensive maceration.

The water method does not require any special change of process, and is inexpensive. It is advisable to have some clear plastic containers with lids in different sizes in your delivery rooms, for the fetus to be taken home in, if so desired.

We have not been able to find this water method in any literature. We hope to raise awareness of other ways of looking after a deceased fetus through this article.

We would be glad to hear about the experiences others have had with the water method.

## Conclusion

The water method is potentially a good way of preserving the young fetus until the funeral or cremation, and deserves further attention.

## Summary

This article introduces the water method, in which cold tap water is used to show the young deceased fetus in its most optimal form to the parents. The result is that the fetus retains its shape and colour for longer and the parents have the opportunity to say goodbye.

## Keywords

IUFD, partus immaturus, water method, spontaneous abortion, preservation, shape retention

## English summary

In this article we present the water method, where we use cold tap water to be able to show the deceased fetus to the parents in his most optimal form. The shape and colour of the fetus will stay intact for a longer period of time, so the parents have more time with their child.

## Keywords

Intrauterine death, immature birth, water method, spontaneous abortion, preservation, deceased fetus

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## Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors state that there is no (financial) conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss L, Frischer L, Richman J. Parental adjustment to intrapartum and delivery room loss. The role of a hospital-based support program. Clin Perinatol 1989; 16:1009-19.

<sup>2</sup> Säflund K, Sjögren B, Wredling R. The role of caregivers after a stillbirth: views and experiences of parents. Birth 2004; 31:132-7.