



# Did I Really Need to Have a C-Section?

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Features Did I *Really* Need to Have a C-Section? The problem with doctors, not moms, picking the birth method. by Denise Schipani |

In the homestretch of my first pregnancy, I imagined childbirth would involve some shouting, a fair amount of blood, and in the end a baby. As it turned out — not so much.

I had a C-section. I know women who've given birth surgically whose feelings fall somewhere on the spectrum between neutral and ecstatic. I am not one of those women. I am angry.

Labor was a nightmare — the kind where you *know* you're having a bad dream but you can't wake yourself up. It took a night and a day of five-minutes-apart contractions to get a labor room and an epidural (I was progressing, but painfully slowly). The pain eased, but then the nightmare closed in. I was tethered to my IV pole and fetal monitor. The lights were dim. I imagined babies being born in rooms around me in the rush and light and heat that I craved for myself.

At dawn on day two, I'd reached 10 centimeters. I pushed for an hour but it was fruitless, dry and bloodless. The doctor offered a C-section, and I acquiesced. What I'd been through seemed to have no end. Surgery, though I didn't want it, held out the promise of an *end*. An hour later, I had my son.

Though his unending needs didn't at first leave me the brain space to indulge in shoulda-coulda-wouldas, I eventually came to regard my incision, as it hardened into a scar, as a badge of dishonor. The first moments of my son's life remain at a frustrating remove. I remember the bright lights; the odd, painless tugging at my abdomen; the conversation between doctors and nurses. But I wasn't really *there*.

I didn't want it to happen again. When I got pregnant 16 months later, I discovered that VBAC (vaginal birth after C-section) was no longer the default position. In fact, it was actively discouraged. Caesarean rates, which had dipped in the late 80s and 90s, were on a steep incline. The year I had my second son, 2004, 29.1% of all births in America were surgical — and it rose to over 30% just a year later, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. An increasing number of women request surgery for convenience or fear of labor. Many OBs, whether wary of malpractice or eager to maintain their schedules, seem more inclined take up a scalpel than to try to ease a troubled labor through to a natural conclusion.

Were my C-sections necessary for life and health or merely expedient and neat? So I figured I'd fight. I read Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions*, about how the labor-industrial complex has all but sucked the "natural" out of childbirth. I wasn't gunning for a homebirth and I am certainly in favor of pain relief, but that didn't mean I wanted to submit to chest-down numbing and having my first glimpse of my child be his startled, bloody face above a surgical drape. I wanted to be there, to participate.

My first and second labors were as different as snowflakes. This time, after a day of merely uncomfortable

contractions, pain slammed me like a Mack truck in the middle of the night. What happened next was like a YouTube video montage of all the sitcom births you've ever watched: The insistence that this baby was going to be born in our speeding, 1997 Corolla, the screech of brakes, the blood-curdling scream as my water broke, the wheelchair careening down the hallway, the urge to push that threatened to split my body in two.

No worries about being at a remove; I was fully present, viewing the scene as if I actually *had* separated in two — the writhing woman on the bed and her doppelganger floating above. My doctor instructed me to push, but I swear I could sense her giving her watch a metaphoric glance, as though she was letting me labor as promised (it had been a fight to even *try* a VBAC), knowing that a C-section was on the final page. Sure enough, after an hour that felt like four minutes, she told me that my child simply was not going to slip under my pubic bone.

I gripped my husband, in the throes of one contraction on top of another, and nodded my head yes.

Everyone is quick to tell me that I did the right thing, my second time, opting for the C. Why take chances with my child's health — or my own? But I've been unable to romanticize my surgery. Instead, I've felt cheated out of what I imagine is the deeply powerful moment of birth. I didn't give birth, it was taken from me. Other women's blasé attitudes about scheduling a C pissed me off. Stories of women who managed labor with a bit of epidural and some guitar music, or whose babies slid from them into a tub in a New-Agey birthing center, made me feel bitter and blue.

I spent hours replaying the hectic hospital scene, imagining myself doing something heroic and womanly like flipping over on all fours, asking for a birthing ball, a shower, a midwife skilled in coaxing stubborn heads from behind unyielding bones. I didn't do any of it. Truth is, I was scared to death.

While it doesn't matter to me as a *mother* how my sons were born, it does matter to me as a *woman*. I'm blessed with my boys but cursed with my scar. Were my C-sections necessary for life and health or merely expedient and neat? Did I lack the will to be my own best advocate, ignoring my instinct in the face of my fear? Or did my fear actually serve a deeper instinct, to relinquish my goals for the sake of my child? Maybe the bitterness lingers *because* I'll never know. I'll always have the question, and though I can work to forgive myself, the doubts, and the scar, will never heal.

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