

Maternity care on the Isles of Scilly

Information for patients

When and where will my appointments and scans take place?

Your first maternity appointment

Your first pregnancy appointment (booking appointment) will be a face-to-face meeting with the midwife at St Mary's Birth Unit.

Your scans

All pregnancy scans take place on the mainland.

- Your dating scan (around 12 weeks) will be at The Hub, Royal Cornwall Hospital, Truro.
- Your anomaly scan (around 20 weeks) is usually at West Cornwall Hospital, Penzance.

We will pay for:

- your travel to mainland hospital appointments.
- your travel for pregnancy scans.
- one companion's flight to attend your 20 week scan.

You are responsible for booking your companion's flight.

When you contact the Patient Transport Service, you will need:

- your NHS number (found in your maternity notes).
- the date, time and location of your appointment.



Patient Transport Service Telephone: 01872 252211

Choosing where to have your baby

If you are planning to have your baby on the mainland

You are advised to leave the Isles of Scilly before 37 weeks to reduce the chance of going into labour beforehand. We advise all pregnant families have a back-up plan for staying on the mainland, as complications can develop at any stage of pregnancy.

Babies are born:

- between 37+0 and 37+6 weeks: around 5% of pregnancies
- between 38+0 and 38+6 weeks: around 12% of pregnancies
- between 39+0 and 39+6 weeks: around 25% of pregnancies.

Even if you are planning to give birth on the Isles of Scilly, it is a good idea to have accommodation available on the mainland. This is usually with family or friends and does not need to be in Cornwall if you have accommodation support elsewhere. Your midwife can discuss this with you according to your personal situation.

Please ask your midwife about 'The Island Haven', which offers accommodation close to the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro, if required. The Patient Transport Service will pay for your flight to the mainland, including your return flight with your baby.

Having your baby on St Mary's

The Island Birth Suite on St Mary's is a low-risk, midwife-led unit. There are no obstetric (doctor-led maternity) or neonatal (newborn baby) services on the island. If a medical emergency happens during labour, your midwife would call 999 and ask for an emergency transfer to the mainland. However, there is no guaranteed emergency transfer service off the island during labour.

If you are thinking about having your baby on the Isles of Scilly, your midwife needs to know this as soon as possible and no later than 30 weeks of pregnancy. This helps us arrange cover if the island midwife has planned leave.

At around 16 weeks, the team leader midwife will contact you. This is in addition to your routine 16 week face-to-face midwife appointment. The call provides an opportunity for the team leader to introduce themselves and discuss any information contained in this leaflet, as well as answer any questions you may have.

At around 34 weeks, you will be offered a 'birthing outside of guidance' discussion with the team leader. This is because everyone is recommended to give birth on the mainland due to possible delays in accessing emergency obstetric care.

If you choose not to give birth on the mainland, during this discussion you can:

- talk through your birth preferences using the BRAIN (Benefits, Risks, Alternatives, Intuition, doing Nothing) tool
- discuss the potential obstetric emergencies and what your midwife would do if these happen
- ask any questions you or your partner may have.

Note

We recommend you give birth on the mainland, where timely access to the full range of maternity and emergency services is available should they be needed.

There is no contracted service for emergency transfer off the Islands when you are in labour. While the HM Coastguard will always do its best to support, it cannot be guaranteed and could delay life-saving care for you or your baby. There may also be a potential delay for an ambulance to meet you once you land on the mainland.

If you live on an off-island and would like a home birth

Your midwife will discuss your planned place of birth with you at every appointment. You will be strongly encouraged and supported to consider having your baby at the Birth Unit at the Royal Cornwall Hospital, Truro.

Weather conditions and tides can be unpredictable and can change quickly throughout the year.

There may also be times when the midwife and supporting health professionals (such as GP or paramedics) cannot reach your island because they are caring for other patients or because travel is difficult.

If you live on an off-island and plan to give birth on St Mary's

We will discuss the additional risks with you of giving birth outside of recommended guidance. If you choose not to give birth on the mainland, a team leader will contact you to discuss your decision about giving birth outside of recommended guidance and develop a personalised care plan with you.

If you do decide to give birth on St Mary's, it is recommended that you move from your off-island to St Mary's from 37 weeks of pregnancy. This helps reduce risks caused by bad weather, tides and limited transfer options.



If you would like to have your baby at home or at the Birth Unit on St Mary's

Your midwife will discuss your birth plans at every appointment and talk to you about any new or existing risks.

Planning a home birth on St Mary's

Home birth is not recommended on St Mary's because we cannot guarantee that a second healthcare professional will be available to attend your birth. We will discuss this fully with you.

Your 34 to 36 week appointment will take place at home. A risk assessment will be carried out, which will consider issues such as access, safety, parking, and whether you plan to use a birth pool. This assessment is offered to everyone planning a community birth. If you would like to use a birth pool, you will need to arrange the hire yourself.

The midwife will attend your birth and ask the GP to attend, if possible.

Note

Please be aware that only one GP is on call at a time and they are also responsible for caring for patients at St Mary's Hospital. This means a GP is unlikely to be present throughout your whole labour.

This differs from care in mainland Cornwall, where 2 midwives attend community births together.



Emergency transfer before your baby is due

If you live on an off-island

Every effort will be made to bring you to St Mary's by ambulance boat. You would then travel by ambulance to St Mary's airport, where you would be airlifted to the mainland by the HM Coastguard helicopter.

Please be aware that bad weather may cause delays in transfer. Although every effort will be made to take you to the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro, you may be taken to another hospital or site if necessary (this may not be in Cornwall).

If you live on St Mary's

You will travel by ambulance to the airport and then by helicopter to the mainland.

You may be taken to a hospital outside Cornwall if the helicopter cannot land in Truro.

Note

At the time of the emergency transfer, a risk assessment will be carried out to determine whether your partner or birth partner can accompany you.



Non-urgent transfer to the mainland

If your midwife, GP or maternity telephone triage service believes you need further assessment, you may be advised to travel to the mainland for a non-urgent review. At the next available opportunity, you would need to make your own way to hospital in Truro for further assessment.

Our Patient Transport Service can help arrange this.



Telephone: 01872 252211

You will usually travel on a scheduled Skybus flight, but the Scillonian ferry may be an option, if appropriate. A full risk assessment will be completed before travel.

Scillonian ferry

- Travel is allowed until 36 weeks of pregnancy.
- After 28 weeks, you will need a letter from your GP or midwife dated within one week of travel.

Skybus flights

- You can fly throughout pregnancy.
- After 28 weeks, you will need a letter from your GP or midwife dated within one week of travel.
- From 40 weeks, you must travel with an escort of your choice and have a GP or midwife letter dated within 24 hours of your flight.

Please see the Skybus and Scillonian travel conditions for full details.



Scillonian website: www.islesofscilly-travel.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/scillonian-conditions-of-carriage-2025-171025.pdf



Skybus website: www.islesofscilly-travel.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/skybus-conditions-of-carriage-2025-220125.pdf

Common pregnancy problems

I am worried about my baby's movements

Your midwife will ask about your baby's movements at every appointment and whenever you contact the Maternity Triage Service.

Feeling your baby move is reassuring and usually shows that your baby is well. If you notice that your baby is moving less than usual, contact Maternity Triage immediately.

Maternity Triage line

➔ Telephone: 01872 258000

The triage line is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice and support.

Depending on your circumstances, you may be offered a CTG (cardiotocography). This is a simple, painless test that monitors your baby's heartbeat and movements to help check their wellbeing.

If appropriate, this monitoring may take place at the Birth Centre on St Mary's. However, depending on your medical history, risk factors, or when the islands' midwife is unavailable, you may be advised to attend the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro instead.

As travel from the islands can take time and may be affected by weather conditions, there may be a delay before your baby can be fully assessed. In some cases, you may not be seen on the same day. You will need to arrange transport to the mainland through Patient Transport.

What happens if I go into labour before I am 37 weeks?

Labour that starts before 37 weeks of pregnancy is called premature labour. If this happens, an emergency transfer to the mainland will be arranged by Coastguard helicopter.

What happens if my waters break?

During pregnancy, a loss of fluid from your vagina may mean that your waters have broken. This is sometimes called Spontaneous Rupture of Membranes (SROM). When your waters break, there is a chance that labour will start spontaneously.

Contact Maternity Triage if you think your waters have broken, or if you notice any fluid loss (of any colour and whatever stage of pregnancy).

A risk assessment will be carried out. You may be asked to attend the hospital maternity unit in Truro. If so, you will need to arrange a flight through Patient Transport.

If you have planned to give birth on the Isles of Scilly and are 37 weeks pregnant or more, your midwife will arrange to see you within 12 hours to assess you.

Could I need to leave St Mary's during labour?

Although this is uncommon, there are some situations where you may be asked to travel to the Royal Cornwall Hospital to give birth, even if you have planned an island birth.

This may happen if the midwife:

- is unwell and another midwife cannot reach the islands
- is already caring for someone else in labour
- has worked overnight and is taking a protected rest period
- is off the islands accompanying another patient transfer
- has reached the maximum number of hours she can safely work.

If any of these situations arise, senior maternity staff will review the situation and do everything possible to arrange alternative midwifery support for you.

What if industrial action affects travel?

If planned industrial action leads to cancelled flights, it may not be possible for a mainland midwife to travel to the Isles of Scilly.

Unfortunately, we have no control over planned industrial action. In this situation, you may be advised to travel to the mainland before your baby is born and give birth at the Royal Cornwall Hospital. Your midwife can discuss options with you.

Returning to the Isles of Scilly after your baby is born

Following the birth of your baby, the needs of both you and your baby will be assessed before you return home.

In most cases, it is safe to return to the islands if:

- you and your baby are well
- your baby was born at full term
- your baby is feeding well
- your baby has had their Newborn Initial Physical Examination (NIPE)
- your baby has no signs of jaundice.

Even if you have been discharged from hospital, we recommend staying on the mainland for at least five days after the birth.

This is because newborn babies often develop jaundice during the first few days after birth. Sometimes a simple blood test is needed to check jaundice levels. This test is taken in the Neonatal Unit – it cannot be taken on St Mary's.

You will receive care from the Isles of Scilly midwife for up to 28 days after birth. This is usually in your own home. If you live on an off-island, the midwife may ask you to attend St Mary's Birth Unit for some appointments.

If you or your baby needs further medical assessment or treatment after returning to the islands, this will take place at Royal Cornwall Hospital. Travel arrangements will depend on how urgent the situation is.

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