



Sweeping of the Membranes at Term

What does sweeping of the membranes mean?

A membrane sweep is one of the more 'natural' ways of encouraging your baby to arrive if you have passed your due date with no sign of labour starting on its own. It is done to help reduce the need for other, more chemically based, methods of labour induction such as prostin gel or ARM (breaking of the waters).

How is it carried out?

Membrane sweeping is done by your midwife or doctor. While internally examining you, he or she will "sweep" a finger around the neck of your womb (cervix). The aim is to separate the membranes around your baby from your cervix. This releases hormones called prostaglandins, which may help kick-start your labour.

A membrane sweep increases the likelihood that labour will start within 48 hours. It has a higher chance of working if the neck of your womb is already softening and preparing for labour.

How effective is a membrane sweep?

There is no guarantee that having a membrane sweep will induce labour, its effectiveness will ultimately depend on how ready your body is to give birth. To gauge this, when examining you internally your care giver will feel for your cervix. If it has begun to soften and thin then a membrane sweep is more likely to succeed as your body has already started to prepare for labour. Opinions vary greatly as to whether membrane sweeps should be routinely given to women who are overdue. So, as with most things maternity related, whether you will be offered one should you go past your due date will largely depend on a discussion between you and your midwife or doctor. However, it is important to note that even if your care giver suggests a membrane sweep, if you don't feel comfortable with the procedure and would prefer your baby to arrive in his or her own time, you are perfectly within your rights to decline.

What are the risks?

Having your 'membranes swept' does not increase the likelihood of infection for you or your baby. It may however cause slight "spotting" of blood or irregular contractions afterwards. Additionally, the extent to which the membrane sweep will feel uncomfortable differs from woman to woman and while some find it absolutely fine, others experience more discomfort.

What is the local policy?

In the Midwifery Led Unit, a sweep is offered to women at or beyond term. The decision to have one lies entirely with the woman herself once she is fully informed of the risks and potential benefits.

Further Information

If you wish to discuss this in more depth, your midwife will be pleased to help you.

References

National Collaborating Centre for Women's and Children's Health. (2008) Induction of Labour. RCOG Press: London.



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