

Membrane Sweep

Information and advice for women

Maternity

What is a membrane sweep?

A membrane sweep is a procedure that can help to stimulate your cervix (the neck of your womb) and start your labour. It involves a midwife placing their finger inside your cervix and making a sweeping movement to separate the membranes that surround your baby from the cervix.

You can discuss the option of a vaginal examination for membrane sweeping at your antenatal appointments after 39 weeks of pregnancy.

What are the benefits of a membrane sweep?

The benefits of a membrane sweep is that it appears to be effective in promoting labour and reduces the chance for formal induction of labour. Studies have shown that around 70% of low-risk women, with membrane sweeping, can end up in spontaneous labour. Furthermore, these studies have supported that women who do undergo membrane sweeping are more likely to go into spontaneous labour in comparison to women who do not.

This is because it releases a hormone called prostaglandin, which is involved in starting labour, by promoting the thinning, stretching and dilatation of the cervix.

There is also an option for additional membrane sweeps if labour does not start spontaneously after the first sweep.

What are the risks of a membrane sweep?

There are no known risks to having a membrane sweep, but you may find it uncomfortable and experience some vaginal bleeding or discharge afterwards. There has been no evidence that sweeping the membranes increases the risk of infection to mum or baby.

Are there any alternatives to having a membrane sweep?

The only alternative to having a membrane sweep would be to do nothing, just wait for your labour to start. If a membrane sweep is not successful you will be offered an induction of your labour.

What are the risks of not having a membrane sweep?

If you decide that you would not want a membrane sweep, that is fine, and it is an option to wait and see if you go into labour.

However, if your pregnancy continues beyond the trust's recommended 10 days past your due date, we advise for you to return for assessment and induction of labour (ML5962).

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The most common reason for formal induction of labour is post-dates pregnancy as pregnancy continuing beyond 41+ weeks may increase the risk of requiring a caesarean section, admission of baby to the neonatal unit and risk of stillbirth and neonatal death. For the induction of labour, you would be admitted to labour ward and this process increases your chance of requiring other interventions such as a drip to speed up your contractions and even a caesarean section.

What does a membrane sweep involve?

A membrane sweep is usually performed either at home or in the antenatal clinic and takes about 10 minutes. You do not need to do anything to prepare for it.

This is what happens:

1. The midwife will explain the procedure to you.
2. She/he will ask you to lie on a couch or bed, remove your underwear and make sure you are comfortable.
3. She/he will examine which way your baby is lying by feeling your tummy and will check your baby's heartbeat.
4. The midwife will examine you internally and use her finger to separate the membranes surrounding your baby from the wall of the womb close to the cervix (neck of the womb) with a circular, sweeping movement.

If your baby's head is high or suspected to be in the breech position, your midwife will refer you to the hospital before a membrane sweep, to check that the placenta is not in front of the baby's head and confirm which position the baby is lying in.

Does it hurt?

A membrane sweep is similar to having a vaginal/internal examination or smear test and can be uncomfortable. The midwife will use some lubricating gel to help reduce the discomfort.

After having a membrane sweep

After your membrane sweep you should wear a sanitary pad and can go home and wait for your labour to start. Most women will go into labour within 48 hours. If you do not go into labour within 48 hours your community midwife will give you an appointment to come for an induction. You will be given more information explaining induction if you need one.

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Discharge

You may experience a 'show' after your membrane sweep; this is a mucousy discharge from the vagina which may contain some blood. If you have any fresh bleeding from your vagina please telephone the delivery suite.

Discomfort

It is likely that you will get some tummy-tightenings over the next 24 hours. You can take some Paracetamol (2 tablets of 500mg) for this, but do not take more than the recommended dose. You might like to have a warm bath too which can also help.

Contact details

If you have any questions or are worried at any time you can contact maternity triage for advice.

Maternity Triage - 0121 507 4181

Further information

For more information about pregnancy, childbirth and our maternity services please see the maternity pages of our website www.swbh.nhs.uk, follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and like us on Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2021). *Inducing labour: NICE guideline* [NG207]. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng207> (Accessed on: 11 August 2023).

Finucane EM, Murphy DJ, Biesty LM, et al (2020). Membrane sweeping for induction of labour. *Cochrane Library*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD000451.pub3> (Accessed on: 11 August 2023).

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