



USING THE STRETCH AND SWEEP METHOD TO BEGIN LABOUR

For most women labour starts naturally between 37 and 42 weeks but some women may need help to start their labour.

What is a stretch and sweep?

Stretch and sweep is a procedure used to try to start a natural labour. Sometimes called sweeping or stripping the membranes, it is offered to women who are close to or past their due date.

Why is it recommended?

Stretch and sweep is used to help start labour and reduce the need for an induction. If it works, you can expect to go into labour within 48 hours.

If it does not work, it can be repeated two or three times over the next few days.

Are there any risks?

There are no known risks to this procedure, so long as you and your baby are well.

Stretch and sweep will not be offered if:

- your placenta is low
- your baby is not head down
- your waters have broken
- you have a vaginal infection.

Stretch and sweep does not work for everyone. It is more likely to work if you are already close to going into labour by yourself.

What can I expect?

Your doctor or midwife will examine your vagina and feel for the position of the cervix (the lower part of the womb) to check if it is opening.

They will insert their finger into the opening and gently 'stretch' it and 'sweep' their finger around the inside of the opening. This separates or 'strips' some of the membranes away from the wall of the womb.

Sweeping of the membranes releases a hormone called prostaglandin which helps labour begin.

Some women describe the procedure as uncomfortable; lubricating gel is used to help relieve the discomfort.

What should I expect after the procedure?

It is common to have a 'show' after a stretch and sweep. The 'show' is a mucous plug that sits inside the opening of the cervix and can be disturbed by the doctor or midwife's finger during the procedure. Whilst it is usually clear, it is normal for this 'show' to have a small amount of blood in it afterwards. Your body will continue to make this clear mucous, and you may notice more of it once you go into labour.

Fresh bleeding from your vagina is not normal. If this happens or you have any concerns, please call the hospital. You may need to come in for assessment.

You may also feel some tightening or contractions in the hours after the stretch and sweep. This is a good sign and means that the prostaglandin hormone has been released. Take two paracetamol tablets if the contractions are too uncomfortable. A warm bath can also help.

What if I choose not to have a stretch and sweep?

You can choose to wait for labour to start on its own, if you prefer. If there are concerns for you and your baby, an induction of labour will be recommended.

For more information

Talk to your doctor or midwife at your next clinic visit.

Related fact sheets

- Induction of labour