Sweeping of Membranes

What is a membrane sweep?
Membrane sweeping is a way to help your cervix get ready for labour and decrease the chance that you will need to have an induction for going overdue, past 41 weeks. Having a membrane sweep is not an induction of labour. While both have the goal of starting labour, membrane sweeps allow for a release of your body's natural prostaglandins. Prostaglandins are hormones that helps the cervix soften, shorten and dilate.

How is a membrane sweep performed?
Membrane sweeping is performed by having a gloved finger placed inside the opening of the cervix. If your cervix is open we are able to run our finger between the lower part of the uterus and the amniotic sac. Separating the sac from the uterus causes the release of prostaglandins.

Membrane sweeps can be performed any time after 38 weeks. Women, especially first-time moms, will require more than one membrane sweep, this doesn't mean it hasn't worked.

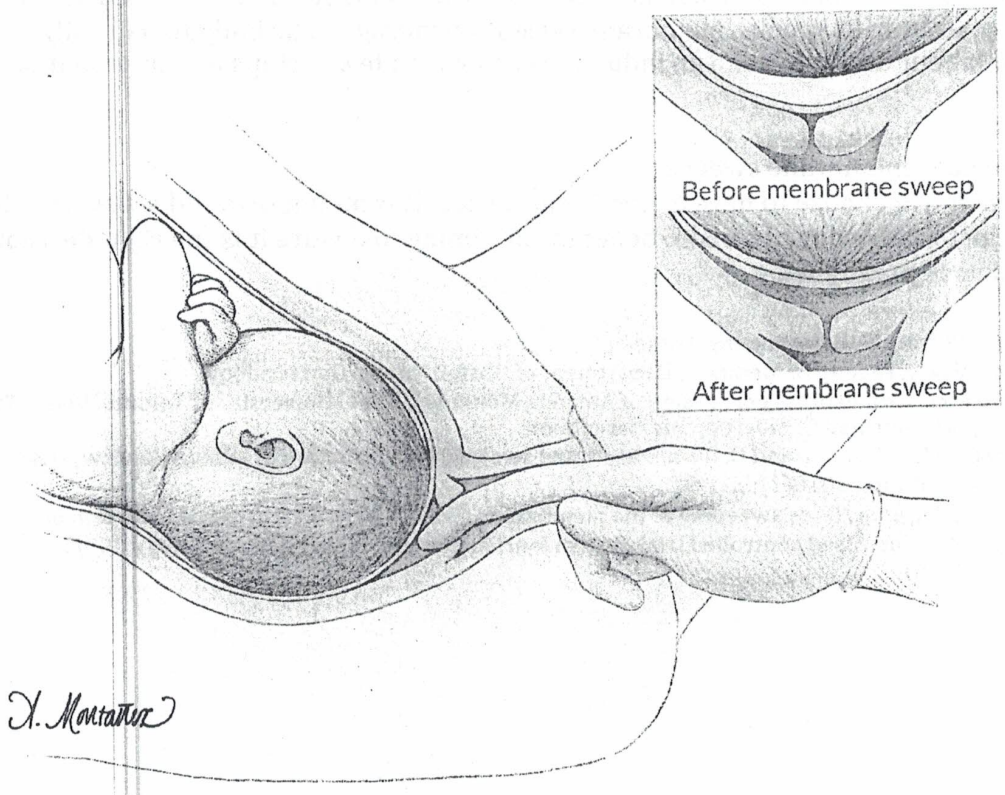

Figure 1. Sweeping of membranes technique [1]

How effective is it?
A number of large studies have shown that membrane sweeps are effective at increasing the chance of going into labour within 24-48 hours, having a shorter labour, and delivering your baby within the next week [4]. It lowers the likelihood of needing an induction for going past 41 weeks of pregnancy. For every 8 membrane sweeps that are performed, we are able to avoid one formal induction of labour [5].

What are the side effects?
The most common side effects of membrane sweeps are discomfort during the examination, vaginal spotting/bleeding, and uterine cramping and contractions that may not lead to labour. Large studies have shown us that there is no increase in the risk of infection, accidentally breaking the water or causing any significant bleeding requiring additional interventions. Membrane sweeps also do not lead to an increased risk of caesarean sections [4].

What if it doesn't work?
Labour may still start on its own at a later time. A formal induction may be needed once the pregnancy goes over 41 weeks. Membrane sweeps encourage your body to naturally prepare for labour and can make an induction easier with fewer steps and interventions needed.

Do I have to have membrane sweeps?
Not all women will choose to have a membrane sweep. It is an important discussion to have with your doctor to review the risks, benefits and timing to ensure it is the right decision for you and your pregnancy.

Adapted from: Sullivan, M. Brad[1]; Leung, Wynne I.[1]
[1]University of Calgary, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology

1. Figure used with express permission of Amanda Montañez. 2014, University of Toronto. Visual Tools to Support Informed Choice: uoft.me/visualtools
2. Boulvain, M., C.M. Stan, and O. Irion, Membrane sweeping for induction of labour (Review). The Cochrane Library, 2010(1): p. 1-92.
3. Boulvain, M., et al., Does sweeping of the membranes reduce the need for formal induction of labour? A randomised controlled trial. British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, 1998. 105: p. 34-40.