UK NSC preterm labour screening recommendation

Following a review of the evidence against strict criteria, the UK NSC does not currently recommend universal screening for risk of preterm labour in pregnancy.

In the UK, over 7% of babies are born prematurely (preterm labour) each year. Preterm babies are at risk of short and long-term health issues, the severity of which is often linked to how early the baby is born.

There are a number of potential tests for assessing which asymptomatic women (women who do not have any symptoms) are at risk of preterm labour, one of these is the measurement of cervical length. On reviewing the evidence, a number of concerns were highlighted including: timing of the test, the measurement for identifying risk and the treatment.

Key findings supporting the UK NSC recommendation

- The measurement of cervical length in asymptomatic women is not reliable enough for use as a screening tool. There are unanswered questions over the timing of the test and there is no standardised ‘normal’ measurement of cervical length in order to establish what an ‘abnormal’ measurement is.

- Therefore it is not known when the test should be offered or whether it is reliable in identifying which pregnancies are at risk and which are not. Screening would identify many women as at risk when they are not, leading to unnecessary preventative treatment.

- There is not enough evidence to be sure that vaginal progesterone (a hormone treatment) is an effective treatment for preventing preterm labour or that it reduces the most severe outcomes (death or disability) for the baby.

The UK NSC regularly reviews its recommendations on screening for different conditions in the light of new research evidence becoming available.

To find out more about the UK NSC’s preterm labour recommendation, please visit:

www.screening.nhs.uk/pretermlabour