Incompetent Cervix

In the second trimester of pregnancy, often between the 16th and 24th weeks, some women may develop a problem known as **incompetent cervix**. When this happens, the cervix (opening to the uterus) opens up and dilates, even though the woman feels no contractions. This condition often leads to miscarriage. Since there are no symptoms, the diagnosis is usually made after the miscarriage. Most women who experience incompetent cervix do so for no definable or predictable reason. Others may have the following risk factors:

- **DES exposure:** DES (diethylstilbestrol) is a medication that was prescribed to some pregnant women in the 1950s-70s. Some of the daughters of these women may have developed certain abnormalities in the shape of their uterus and cervix.

- **Cervical surgeries:** Some evidence suggests that multiple D&Cs, cervical "Cone," "LEEP" or laser biopsies of the cervix, or a significant cervical tear after a previous delivery can increase the potential risk of incompetent cervix.

- **Multiple gestations:** Carrying twins or triplets can potentially increase the risk of incompetent cervix.

- **Prior history of incompetent cervix:** Once a woman has had a pregnancy with incompetent cervix, she is at higher risk of developing it again.

Incompetent cervix may not be predictable or preventable. In cases where incompetent cervix is diagnosed before the pregnancy is lost, the cervix may be kept closed with a special stitch called a **cerclage**. This outpatient surgical procedure is usually done at 12-14 weeks, in the Labor & Delivery Unit with epidural anesthesia. Usually the woman is allowed to go home later the same day, or the next morning. Most women with a cerclage will notice a heavier than usual vaginal discharge throughout the pregnancy. Some women will be placed on home bed rest after this surgery.

Your doctor will discuss complications and restrictions you will need to be aware of regarding cerclage and incompetent cervix with you. Please be sure to ask any questions you may have.