

# Previous abortions raise risk of premature births

Kat Lay

Women who have had an abortion or surgery to treat a miscarriage are more likely to have a premature baby in future, researchers say.

A procedure used in surgical abortions, and in the surgical treatment of miscarriage, increases the chance of giving birth to a future baby at under 37 weeks by 30 per cent.

In the UK, where about 7 per cent of babies are expected to be born prematurely each year, the increased risk of an early delivery would be about 9 per cent.

For women who had had more than one surgical abortion or miscarriage the risk increased by 75 per cent.

Premature babies are at higher risk of illness, disability and even death — lung and bowel problems are particularly likely.

Willem Ankum, presenting the research at the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology's annual conference in Lisbon, said that his results should push doctors and women to use "non-invasive, safe, well-tolerated, cheap and accessible" alternative techniques — such as medicines

to start womb contractions — to manage abortion and miscarriage.

Pro-choice groups have long argued that easier access to abortion would mean that more women could have medical abortions, which are best provided in early pregnancy.

Dr Ankum said: "We think [the increased risk] may be related to damage to the cervix.

"There are all types of fibres being stretched or even broken which are needed to prevent premature birth ... Dilation is always used in surgical termination."

About 49 per cent of UK abortions, or 90,000 a year, are surgical — and experts said that the vast majority would dilate the cervix in the same way as the techniques considered in the study.

Adam Balen, the chairman of the British Fertility Society, said: "This is a hugely important study and reinforces the need for ensuring that we have early pregnancy assessment units that can help with medical management of miscarriage."

The research, from a team of reproductive specialists in Amsterdam, looked at 21 studies involving 1,853,017 women.

Times June 17<sup>th</sup> 2015