



Answers to Your Questions about Circumcision

What is circumcision?

Circumcision is the surgical removal (cutting off) of the fold of skin that normally covers the *glans* (head) of the penis. This double layer of skin, sometimes called the *prepuce*, is more commonly known as the foreskin.

Why is the foreskin there?

The foreskin has three known functions: protective, sensory, and sexual.

During infancy, the foreskin is attached to the glans and protects it from urine, feces, and abrasions from diapers. Throughout life, the foreskin keeps the glans soft and moist and protects it from trauma and injury. Without this protection, the glans becomes dry, calloused, and desensitized from exposure and chafing.

Specialized nerve endings in the foreskin enhance sexual pleasure.

The foreskin may have functions not yet recognized or understood.

"The foreskin protects the glans throughout life."

American Academy of Pediatrics

When and why did doctors in the U.S. start circumcising babies?

Doctors in the English-speaking countries started circumcising babies in the mid-1800s "to prevent masturbation," which some doctors claimed caused many diseases, including epilepsy, tuberculosis and insanity. Doctors have given other reasons since then, but all of them, including the claim that circumcision prevents cancer of the penis, cancer of the cervix and venereal diseases, have been disproven. Cutting off the foreskin to keep the rest of the penis clean is like pulling teeth instead of brushing them. We know that the foreskin is a normal, sensitive, functional part of the body.

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If my son isn't circumcised, won't he be teased?

Some parents think that their son should be circumcised so that he will "match" his father, brothers, or friends. As parents, we can help our children to feel good about their bodies and to respect individual differences. Most children will understand a simple, honest explanation:

"When your father and brothers were born, most parents were told that circumcision was important for health. Now we know better."

With the circumcision rate in the U.S. steadily declining, parents no longer need worry about teasing. In 1994, more than 40% of baby boys born in the U.S. left the hospital intact. Worldwide, 85% of males are intact.

With more and more males growing up intact, it is *circumcised* males who are beginning to feel "different." Many *circumcised* men have reported that *they* have been teased because they *did not* have a foreskin.

"Nature is a possessive mistress, and whatever mistakes she makes about the structure of the less essential organs such as the brain and stomach, in which she is not much interested, you can be sure that she knows best of the genital organs."

Sir James Spence

Is circumcision painful?

Yes. Circumcision is extremely painful - and traumatic - for a baby. Just being strapped down is frightening for a baby. The often repeated statement that babies cannot feel pain is not true. *Babies are as sensitive to pain as anyone else.* Most babies scream frantically when their foreskins are cut off. Some defecate. Some lapse into a coma. *The reason some babies do not cry when they are circumcised is that they **cannot** cry because they are in a state of shock.* Most babies are circumcised without anesthesia. Anesthetics injected into the penis do not always work. Being stuck with a needle in the penis is itself painful for a baby, just as it would be for anyone else. No pain medication is given after the surgery or during the week to ten days it takes the wound to heal.

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Does circumcision have risks?

Yes. Like any other surgery, circumcision has risks. They include:

- Excessive bleeding
- Infection
- Complications from anesthesia
- Surgical mistakes, including loss of glans and loss of entire penis
- Death

Many circumcised males suffer from:

- Extensive scarring
- Skin tags and skin bridges
- Bleeding of the circumcision scar
- Curvature of the penis
- Tight, painful erections
- Difficulty ejaculating
- Impotence
- Feelings of having been violated
- Feelings of having been mutilated

All circumcised males lose some or most of the sensitivity in their glans and *all* of the sensitivity in their foreskins.

Circumcision may have risks and complications not yet recognized or understood.

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"Routine circumcision is not a medical issue or a social issue. It is a sexual issue and a human rights issue."

Frederick Hodges

Circumcision is surgery

Most parents do not know what is actually done to a baby when he is circumcised. The baby is placed spread-eagle on his back on a board and his arms and legs are strapped down so that he cannot move. His genitals are scrubbed and covered with antiseptic. His foreskin is torn from the glans and slit lengthwise so that the circumcision instrument can be inserted. Then his foreskin is cut off, usually without anesthetic.

Most parents who *see* a baby being circumcised and *how he reacts* decide against circumcision and keep their baby intact.

Parents have new concerns

More and more parents - including Jewish parents - are questioning the wisdom of subjecting their baby to the pain and risks of circumcision and its life-long consequences. More and more parents are wondering if they have the right to consent to the irreversible amputation of a healthy, normal, sensitive, functional part of their baby's penis - an amputation that experts regard not just as "unnecessary," but as *contraindicated*. More and more parents are becoming truly informed and, as a result, more and more parents are deciding against circumcision and are keeping their baby boys intact.

"The best reason to let a baby keep his foreskin intact is that it's almost a certainty that he will be glad you did."

John A. Erickson

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