

Circumcision - surgical procedures

Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin that covers the tip of the penis. The functions of the foreskin include protecting the head of the penis and contributing to sexual sensations. Circumcision is typically done in the first few days after birth, since the risk of complications increases in older babies, boys and men. Circumcision is an elective surgical procedure, which means in many cases that it is done for cosmetic reasons. Ultimately, it is a matter of parental choice. Many male babies are circumcised because of religious tradition or hygiene concerns. Studies indicate that circumcision offers health benefits, although some researchers argue the benefits are too small to justify surgery.

Problems associated with the uncircumcised penis

The health risks of remaining uncircumcised include:

- An uncircumcised boy has a greater risk of developing urinary tract infections than a circumcised boy. This increased risk only seems to apply to boys less than 12 months, and the risk declines with age.
- A higher risk of cancer of the penis. However, this type of cancer is very rare in both circumcised and uncircumcised males. Good genital hygiene seems to reduce the risk.
- A slightly higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), however, safe sex practices are far more effective in the prevention of STDs than circumcision.
- Risk of foreskin infections.
- Risk of foreskin contraction (phimosis).
- Genital hygiene is more difficult for an uncircumcised boy than a circumcised boy.

Medical issues to consider

Before the operation, you need to discuss a range of issues with your doctor or surgeon including:

- Medical history.
- Current problems relating to the foreskin. Some males need circumcision to treat conditions such as recurring infections beneath the foreskin (balanitis) or an unusually tight foreskin.
- Any bad reactions or side effects from any drugs.
- The age of the patient. Circumcision is generally more complicated for boys and men than infants.

Surgical procedures

The operation takes about 10 minutes. There are many different methods of circumcision. In general, the procedure involves numbing the area with local anaesthetic creams or injection. A bell-shaped instrument is inserted under the foreskin to separate it from the penis. The foreskin is then removed using one of the following instruments:

- Scissors
- Scalpel
- Special clamp placed around the foreskin.

Immediately after the operation

After the operation you can expect:

- Discomfort
- Swelling
- Small patch of blood in your son's nappy (smaller than a 10 cent piece- if any larger, contact your doctor immediately)
- A light crust soon forms around the wound

Possible complications after surgery

Some of the possible complications include:

- Pain
- Excessive bleeding
- Infection
- Cutting the foreskin too short or too long
- Irritation to the head of the penis, since the foreskin seems to protect the head of the penis
- Narrowing of the urethra (the tube that allows urine to exit from the body)
- Decreased sensitivity, which may cause a decrease in potential sexual pleasure later in life
- Remember that complications following circumcision are rare.

Taking care of your child at home

Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Offer lots of cuddles and comfort.
- Usually, a little petroleum jelly or ointment on a light gauze dressing is applied to the wound.
- Apply fresh petroleum jelly and a new gauze dressing at each nappy change. This reduces the risk of urine irritating the wound.
- Avoid bathing your child's penis until healing is complete - around one week after the surgery. In the meantime, clean gently with warm water once daily, and after each soiled nappy.

Seek urgent medical attention

See your doctor immediately if your child experiences any of the following symptoms:

- Continuous bleeding from the wound
- Discolouration of the penis
- Failure to produce a wet nappy within six to eight hours of the circumcision
- Fever
- Ongoing pain
- Redness or swelling of the penis that doesn't resolve after three to five days or so
- A yellowish discharge from the penis
- If the plastic bell (if used) doesn't fall off after 10 to 12 days.

Long term outlook

Circumcision should always be performed by a qualified and experienced doctor or surgeon. Ultimately, whether or not to circumcise is a matter of parental choice. Studies indicate that the procedure offers a reduced risk of various health problems - such as urinary tract infections and penile cancer but the margin of benefit is small.

Genital hygiene and the uncircumcised penis

If you choose not to circumcise your son, attention to genital hygiene is important. The oily glands beneath the foreskin produce a thick, white substance called smegma that must be carefully and regularly washed away. The foreskin in the young male is usually attached to the glans (head) of the penis until about five years of age. Trying to pull back the foreskin before it is ready can risk injury to the delicate tissues and cause scarring. Suggestions include:

- Wash the foreskin carefully with soap and warm water every time you bath your son.
- Your son's foreskin may become retractable anywhere between three years of age and puberty. Teach your son how to retract his foreskin and clean his penis while bathing.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Family Planning Association Tel. (03) 9257 0100

Things to remember

- Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin that covers the tip of the penis.
- Studies indicate that circumcision offers health benefits, although some researchers argue the benefits are too small to justify surgery.
- Generally, a bell-shaped instrument is inserted under the foreskin, which is then removed with scissors, scalpel or a special clamp.

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Better Health Channel

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