

Circumcision



What is circumcision?

At birth, baby boys have loose skin that covers the head of the penis. This skin is called the foreskin. When all or part of the foreskin of the penis is cut off, this is called circumcision.

Why is circumcision done?

Circumcision is done for many reasons including religious, cultural, looks, and health. Some religious groups circumcise all boys as a faith-based practice. Many people in the United States choose to circumcise their baby boys because they believe it is culturally normal. It is not a common practice in South America, Europe, or Asia.

Some parents choose circumcision so that their son will have a penis that looks like his father's if the father was also circumcised. Other people choose circumcision because they believe it is cleaner or will protect the boy or man from infection or cancer later in life.

Does circumcision protect against infection or cancer?

Circumcision does seem to protect against some types of infection or cancer. Cancer of the penis is one type of cancer that circumcision may prevent. However, cancer of the penis is very rare. One hundred thousand circumcisions would need to be done to prevent one case of cancer of the penis. Circumcision may also decrease the chance of some sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV and human papilloma virus (HPV). See the next page for more information on the risks and benefits of circumcision.

What happens during a circumcision?

Babies born in the hospital are usually circumcised before they go home. Health care providers also perform circumcisions in their offices and clinics within a few weeks after birth.

Religious circumcisions are most often done at home or in a synagogue.

Before the circumcision is performed, some providers give an injection (shot) of a small amount of anesthetic (numbing medicine) at the base of the penis to block the pain or put an anesthetic cream on the penis to numb the area that will be cut.

There are 2 different ways to do a circumcision. In one type, a clamp placed around the head of the penis cuts off the blood supply to the foreskin, and the foreskin above the clamp is cut off. The clamp is left on the penis until the area heals and it falls off a few days later. In another type of circumcision, the foreskin is cut off with scissors or a scalpel.

After the circumcision, petroleum jelly and sometimes gauze may be put over the area of the penis where the skin was removed. This protects the end of the penis while it heals.

Can I keep my son's penis cleaner if it is circumcised?

Regular washing with soap and water will keep any penis clean. Circumcision does not make the penis cleaner. Uncircumcised boys do need to be taught to clean beneath their foreskin, just like they need to be taught to wash their hands or brush their teeth.

How do I decide if I should have my son circumcised?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says that newborn circumcision may have health benefits. They do not recommend circumcision for all boys as a routine procedure. The AAP recommends that you talk to your health care provider to decide if circumcision is the right choice for your family. You may also wish to discuss the question with your family or spiritual advisor.



What are the risks and benefits of circumcision?

We do not have a lot of good scientific information about the health risks or benefits of circumcision.

Possible Risks:

Very few baby boys (less than 1 in 100) will have a problem after circumcision, such as bleeding or mild infection of the penis. These problems are usually not serious and are easy to treat.

Less common problems are:

- Removal of too much or too little foreskin

Some rare problems are:

- Narrowing of the opening of the penis, which can cause problems with urination
- Removal of part of the penis or death of some of the other skin on the penis
- Infection that spreads to other parts of the body

People used to think babies did not really feel pain. Now we know that they do. Many baby boys appear to feel a lot of pain during circumcision if anesthesia is not used.

We do not know if circumcision affects sexual function or sensation.

Possible Benefits:

- Less risk for some kinds of cancers, like cancer of the penis
- Fewer urinary tract (bladder or kidney) infections for babies
- Less risk for some sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV, herpes, and HPV
- May protect female sexual partners from some sexually transmitted infections

For More Information

American Academy of Family Physicians: Circumcision

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/pregnancy-newborns/caring-for-newborns/infant-care/circumcision.html>

MedlinePlus: Circumcision (includes a slide show on the procedure)

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/circumcision.html

American Academy of Pediatrics: Policy statement on circumcision

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/3/e756.abstract>

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