

# CIRCUMCISION



Circumcision is the removal of the flap of skin which naturally covers the tip of the penis. Many people, including some doctors, have very strong feelings about circumcision. There are conflicting points of view about the risks and possible benefits of circumcision. Legal and ethical issues about circumcision are also being widely discussed.

Medical specialists in Australia have concluded that there is no medical reason for routine circumcisions of newborn male infants.

## Why has circumcision been done?

- Circumcision has been done for several thousand years. It may have started as a hygiene measure in communities living in hot, dry, dusty climates, and then became a cultural and religious ritual.
- In the last 100 years, circumcision rates increased until most boys were circumcised in the 1950s in English speaking countries. More recently, the number of boys circumcised has decreased, and now less than ten percent of boys are circumcised in Australia. In many European countries even fewer boys are circumcised.
- Now most circumcisions are done for family, cultural or religious reasons.
- Sometimes circumcision needs to be done for medical reasons, such as when the foreskin is too tight.

## Why parents choose not to have their baby circumcised

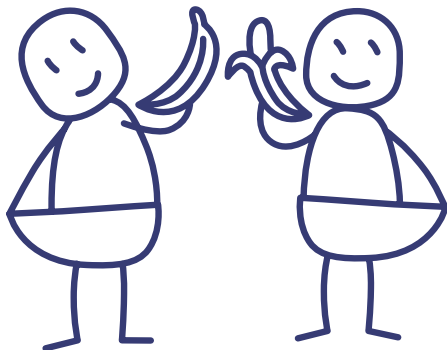
- They are aware that it is natural to have a foreskin, and it plays an important role in protecting the delicate end of the penis, especially while nappies are being worn.
- They want to avoid an operation, because any operation has some risks. Complications are rare, but there can be bleeding, infection and damage to the tip of the penis.
- Circumcision can be painful for the child, both at the time of the operation and for some days after.
- Many people believe that removing the foreskin may lead to the tip of the penis being less sensitive, perhaps leading to less sexual pleasure later in life.
- As most boys are not being circumcised, parents want their son to look like other boys of his age.

## Why parents choose to have their baby circumcised

- Many parents who choose circumcision want it for cultural reasons, or so that their son will look like his father or other family members (perhaps older brothers).
- Recent research has found that boys who have been circumcised are less likely to have a urinary infection in the first year of their life than boys who have not been circumcised. Circumcised infants have a risk

of about one in 500 of getting a urinary tract infection, while uncircumcised infants have a risk of about one in 100. It is not possible to tell which boys would benefit from having a circumcision, so many boys would be needlessly circumcised.

- Circumcision prevents some infections under the foreskin which may happen in infancy and later childhood. However if they occur, they can be treated without the need for a circumcision. Boys who have been circumcised can get infections of the tip of the penis (also uncommon).
- Circumcision prevents a very rare cancer of the penis. This cancer occurs in only about one in 100,000 uncircumcised men, and regular washing of the penis under the foreskin by men probably prevents it. Well over 99.99 percent of uncircumcised men do not get this cancer.
- Circumcised men may run a lower risk of getting sexually transmitted infections, perhaps including HIV. However, circumcision is not an appropriate substitute for other better forms of protection (such as condom use).



## The opinion of child health specialists

Specialist groups of doctors and surgeons in many countries including Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States have said that: 'There is no medical reason for routine male circumcision.' In other words, they are saying that circumcision should only be done:

- when a boy or a man has developed problems, and it is the opinion of the boy's doctors that a circumcision may be helpful
- when there are cultural reasons which are important to the parents.

## Having circumcision done safely

Some parents will decide to have their child circumcised.

- They need to be sure that their doctor refers them to a surgeon (who will do the operation) who is skilful and who has had a lot of experience in doing circumcisions, and an appropriate anaesthetic should be used so that the boy does not have a lot of pain.
- The place where the operation is done needs to be able to provide good care for the child (usually in a hospital).
- To reduce the risks and discomfort for the child, the operation is best done under a general anaesthetic after the age of six months.

## Looking after the penis and foreskin

- Care of the foreskin and penis is simple.
- For most male babies and young boys, the foreskin is still attached to the glans (tip of the penis).
- Do not try to push the foreskin of a young boy back until it can move freely by itself. Pushing it away from the glans may cause damage to the tip of the penis or the foreskin.
- With time, the foreskin moves back more easily, and boys should be encouraged to wash under the foreskin every time they bath or shower. The age when this happens is variable - different for different boys.
- Make sure that they know to push the foreskin down over the tip of the penis after they have washed it. If it stays up, the foreskin may swell (drainage of blood away from the foreskin may be affected), and the foreskin can become tight and painful.
- The white substance (smegma) under the foreskin is natural and does not cause health problems - it simply needs to be washed away regularly.

## Medical, ethical and legal issues

- Circumcision has become a human rights issue, as many people consider it an unnecessary medical procedure done to children without their consent, removing a healthy part of their body, causing them pain and exposing them to unnecessary risks.
- Female circumcision has been almost universally seen as child abuse, and is forbidden in almost all parts of the world. Why, they ask, is male circumcision not seen the same way?
- The legal right of parents to decide to have their son circumcised is being challenged. They have rights in law to make decisions about treatment of their child for minor illness, but do they have the right to request an operation on a healthy child?
  - It is lawful for a doctor to circumcise an infant, so long as the circumcision is performed expertly and reflects current 'best practice', it is believed to be in the child's best interest, and parents who request circumcision are fully informed, and formally consent to the operation.
- It seems possible that a man may be able to take legal action against his parent(s) for requesting and consenting to circumcision, but it is our understanding that this has not been tested in law yet.

## For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline  
8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week  
Telephone (08) 9368 9368  
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546  
[www.ngala.com.au](http://www.ngala.com.au)
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line  
(24hr service)  
Telephone (08) 9272 1466  
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432

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