

CIRCUMCISIONS: PROS AND CONS

Immanuel St. Joseph's

Mayo Health System

DEFINITION

Circumcision means cutting off the foreskin that covers the head (*glans*) of the penis. Studies vary, but indicate that 70-90% of boys in the U.S. are being circumcised. The highest rates are in the midwest.

CULTURAL / RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

Followers of the Jewish and Moslem faiths perform circumcision for religious reasons. Nonreligious circumcisions became popular in English-speaking countries between 1920 and 1950 because it was thought that circumcision might help prevent sexually transmitted diseases. Circumcision never became a common practice in Asia, South America, Central America, or most of Europe. Over 80% of the world's male population is not circumcised. Circumcision rates have fallen to 1% in Britain and 40% in Canada.

PURPOSE OF THE FORESKIN

The foreskin protects the glans against urine, feces, and other types of irritation. Rare infections of the opening of the penis and scarring of the opening occur almost exclusively in a circumcised male. The foreskin may also serve a sexual function, namely protecting the sensitivity of the glans.

BENEFITS OF CIRCUMCISION

- May protect against urinary tract infections during the first year of life, however, there is only a 1% chance that an uncircumcised infant will get infected.
- Prevents infections under the foreskin and persistent tight foreskin. However, both of these conditions are uncommon and are usually due to excessive attempts to retract the foreskin.
- Protects against cancer of the foreskin, although good hygiene offers equal protections against this rare condition.
- Another argument for circumcision is so the boy will look like other boys or like his father. However, the psychologic harm of being different from the father has never been documented. In general, boys don't mind looking different from other males in their family. However, they do mind being harassed in the locker room or shower, which may occur if most of their buddies are circumcised.

RISKS / DISADVANTAGES OF CIRCUMCISION

- Complications (*less than 1%*) may include skin infections, bloodstream infections, bleeding, gangrene, scarring, and various surgical accidents. In a small percentage (*less than 10%*), it is not always possible to remove the ideal amount of foreskin, and some parents may desire an additional procedure when the boy is older to remove additional foreskin. The final appearance of the penis may vary.
- Pain occurs, however, most physicians use local anesthetic.
- Circumcision will also involve additional cost.
- Not all insurance companies cover routine newborn circumcision, and families may incur additional charges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Circumcision for religious purposes will continue. The need for circumcision for other reasons will remain controversial and open to opinion. Physician recommendations vary as well. The risks and benefits are too small to swing a decision either way. In the end, this remains primarily a parental decision. If you desire a circumcision, it is best to perform this in the newborn period. Older infants and toddlers require general anesthesia, with additional risks.