

There are many different views in society today about whether parents should circumcise their baby boy or young son.

Parents who choose to have their infant male circumcised usually do so for three broad reasons. These are;

1. For health reasons
2. For hygiene and appearance reasons, and
3. For religious or cultural reasons

Ethical and human rights issues have been debated regarding infant male circumcision. This is because;

1. the foreskin is known to have a specific purpose
2. the operation is done mostly without a medical reason, and
3. the infant is unable to decide for himself

The decision to circumcise or not to circumcise your son involves knowing about the potential harm (or risks) and the potential benefits.

Some of the benefits identified in the medical and scientific research include;

- a 'sense of belonging' the person will have to their religious/cultural group because circumcision is regarded as a "normal practice" for that group, and
- a decreased risk of some diseases – like urinary tract infections and some sexually transmitted infections

Some of the potential harm or risks include;

- pain due to the operation (this can be extreme where the right type of pain medication is not used)
- bleeding
- infection
- loss of some function of the penis due to complications,
- in some cases psychological harm for the child, and
- the 'violation' of individual rights – as the child is unable to decide for themselves in regards to their body

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The detailed policy statement on circumcision can be found at

www.racp.edu.au/page/policy-and-advocacy/paediatrics-and-child-health



The Royal Australasian
College of Physicians

Paediatrics & Child Health Division

Circumcision

A guide for parents



This brochure has been developed to help parents make an informed decision about circumcision. The information has come from medical and scientific research that has been carefully examined to make sure you have the right information about the risks and benefits.

A group of doctors, nurses and parents have put this information together and they strongly support and recommend you talking more to your family doctor or paediatrician.

The Paediatrics & Child Health Division of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians believes that newborn baby boys and young infants do not need to be circumcised, unless there is a medical reason.

What is circumcision?

Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin, which is a fold of skin that covers the tip of the penis.

Circumcision has been performed on boys for several thousands of years. Knowledge of the exact origins of the practice of circumcision has been lost but it is an important ritual as part of some religious faiths.

What does the foreskin do?

The foreskin has two main functions.

1. It protects the tip of the penis (also known as the glans).
2. It also has a sensory function as it contains some of the most sensitive areas of the penis.

How do you take care of the foreskin?

It is normal for the foreskin to be connected to the tip of the penis in newborn males and for it to be too narrow to pull back .

The foreskin requires no special attention in infancy. It should be left alone.

The foreskin naturally begins to loosen and separate away from the tip of the penis during childhood, so that by the age of 5 most boys can partially pull back the foreskin. It can be gently pulled back while bathing at any age, **as far as is comfortable**, and the visible parts of the penis cleaned along with the rest of the body. The foreskin should never be forcibly pulled back as this may be painful, or result in injury to the foreskin.

By puberty most boys will be able to fully pull back the foreskin away from the tip of the penis.



Facts and figures about circumcision

- As a parent you have a choice about whether to circumcise your son or not. It is important that you understand that it involves an operation and therefore has risks.
- There are fewer boys being circumcised in Australia and New Zealand in recent years than in the past. Currently, only 10-20% of boys in Australia and less than 10 % of boys in New Zealand are circumcised.
- Circumcision is generally a safe operation but as with all operations there are risks of minor complications and there have been cases of rare but more serious complications. Some of the minor complications include an infection of the penis, bleeding where the foreskin was removed and poor cosmetic result. Less common but serious complications include damage to the tip of the penis, loss of the penis, or even death.
- Circumcision will be painful for the baby or child, both at the time of the operation and for some days after. *The Paediatrics & Child Health Division of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians(RACP) strongly recommends the use of pain relief both during and after the operation. RACP recommends the use of an injected local anaesthetic for very young boys and for older boys, a general anaesthetic during the operation and afterwards other types of pain relief like paracetamol (eg. Panadol or Panamax).*
- Most circumcisions are carried out for family, cultural or religious reasons. Very rarely is a circumcision done because of medical reasons.
- Circumcision may lower a boy's chance of getting a urinary tract infection, particularly in the first year of life. Circumcision is of most benefit to those boys who have recurrent urinary tract infections or a condition known as urinary reflux.
- Circumcision reduces the risk of infections under the foreskin, which sometimes happens in infancy and later in childhood.
- In cases where the foreskin is excessively tight around the tip of the penis, (known as phimosis), circumcision may not need to be the first option. This type of situation will often respond well to other treatment such as the application of special creams.
- Circumcision almost eliminates the risk of developing cancer of the penis later in life. This is however, an extremely rare condition with an incidence of 1 in 250,000 men in Australia.
- In countries with high rates of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and syphilis, circumcised men have a lower risk of getting these infections. In countries such as Australia and New Zealand, where these diseases are rare, research suggests that being circumcised does not make a significant difference. In any case, circumcision is no substitute for safe sex practices such as condom use.
- How circumcision affects sexual sensation of the penis is not clear. Medical and scientific research show both improved and reduced sexual pleasure for men circumcised as adults.
- Many families with circumcised fathers, are raising uncircumcised sons without any social or psychological consequences.
- Some of the medical research says that there are a growing number of men getting operations to reconstruct the foreskin of their penis following circumcision as an infant.
- Circumcision can be put off until the boy is old enough to understand the risks and benefits and make the decision for himself.

Summary

There are many different views in today's society about circumcision. As a parent you need to make an informed decision after carefully looking at all the facts about the benefits and risks for your child.

If you request a circumcision for your child, ensure that it is done in a safe, child-friendly environment by properly trained and qualified staff. Your son should receive the right care, including medicine for pain relief and safe management of complications, should they occur.