

Circumcision and caring for normal foreskin

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Taking care of the foreskin

The **foreskin** refers to the loose extra skin at the end of the penis. In a newborn, the foreskin is fused with the glans or the head of the penis. This is normal. Over the next several years the foreskin naturally separates from the head of the penis and becomes retractable. There is no strict timeline for this process and, generally, it's best to let nature take its course.

Circumcision

Circumcision is the oldest planned surgical procedure and refers to the surgical removal of the foreskin. It is performed just in newborns for social and cultural reasons. In older children, it is performed for medical reasons, including phimosis (where the foreskin is scarred and prevents its normal retraction), repeated infections of the foreskin (called balanoposthitis) or repeated urinary tract infections associated with some abnormalities of the urinary bladder.

There is ongoing debate about the benefits of circumcising a newborn baby.

There are potential benefits like a reduced risk of urinary tract infections in early infancy, potential decreased risk of sexually transmitted infections in adulthood and a decreased risk of cancer of the penis. However, because the risk of these conditions is generally low in Canada and there are ways to prevent these conditions, doctors generally advise against the operation. Parents have to weigh these other potential benefits against possible risks and decide what is best for their child.

Every newborn going through a circumcision **must** get adequate pain relief and anesthesia, either by local anesthesia or by applying an anesthetic cream, before the operation.

When not to perform a circumcision

If the child has:

- Any abnormalities of the opening of the urethral hole (when the urethral meatus or hole does not open in a normal location at the tip of the head of the penis);
- A curvature of the penis;
- Is a premature baby;
- Has other abnormalities of the scrotum.

If there is any doubt, talk to a urologist before going through the operation.

Potential complications with circumcision

Like every operation, circumcision can also be associated with some complications, including:

- Bleeding;
- Adhesions between the penis skin and the head of the penis;
- Excess skin left behind;
- Narrowing of the opening of the urethra on the head of the penis; and
- Injury to the penis head or the urethra (these are rare).

The risk of these complications is usually less than 1 in 100. Parents wanting circumcision for their babies should be aware of these potential complications.

After the operation, parents should follow the doctor's orders to care for the skin and make sure penile skin that is left does not get stuck to the head of the penis during the healing phase. You can prevent this by gently retracting the penis skin during healing.