



Professor Andrew Holland
Paediatric surgeon

Circumcision

What is circumcision?

Circumcision is the medical term for removal of the foreskin, which is a fold of skin covering the tip of the penis. It is one of the most common surgical procedures performed in males.

In children the procedure is typically performed either in the newborn period under a local anaesthetic, often by a surgically experienced general practitioner, or under a general anaesthetic after 6 months of age by a surgeon. In adults the surgery can be performed at any age under either a local or general anaesthetic, depending on the preference of the patient, their general health and the recommendation of the treating surgeon.

When is the procedure performed?

The majority of boys being circumcised in childhood have the surgery at the request of their parents as a result of religious affiliation, cultural identity or family tradition. A minority of boys are circumcised for medical reasons, including phimosis (abnormal narrowing of the opening of the foreskin), recurrent urinary tract infections or repeated infections of the foreskin itself.

What is involved during the treatment?

In the newborn period, local anaesthetic is usually administered at the base of the penis to reduce the pain of the procedure. In some cases, topical local anaesthetic cream may also be applied to help reduce discomfort. A variety of techniques may be used depending on the preference, skills and experience of the treating doctor. Often a Plastibell ring is used, with some of the foreskin left to fall away with the ring between 4 to 7 days following the procedure.

Beyond the newborn period, in children the surgery is normally performed under a general anaesthetic in a hospital as a day-case procedure. The child will need to fast prior to the surgery. Once anaesthetised, a local anaesthetic nerve block would also be used to help reduce any pain or discomfort in the first 4 to 6 hours after the procedure. The foreskin is surgically removed and normally sent for subsequent histopathology (examination of tissues under the microscope). Soluble sutures would be used to close the wound and an antimicrobial ointment or equivalent dressing applied to help prevent infection after the operation.

What are the complications?

Circumcision is a generally safe procedure but as with all procedures there are risks involved. Bleeding where the foreskin was removed and infection of the penis can both occur after surgery in about 1 to 5% of cases.

In rare cases, bleeding may be severe and require a second operation to stop the bleeding. Less commonly, a narrowing of the opening of the urethra, the tube from which urine leaves the body, may occur several months or even years after the original circumcision and require a second procedure to widen the opening.

What are the benefits?

Circumcision significantly reduces the risk of urinary tract infections and eliminates the risks of infections and other problems related to the foreskin itself. Circumcised adults may have a lower risk of acquiring and transmitting some sexually transmitted diseases in populations with a high incidence of these diseases, although the procedure does not eliminate such risks. Penile cancer is less common in circumcised males, but this remains a very rare condition even in uncircumcised males.

Where to get help

- Your general practitioner (GP)
- A specialist paediatric surgeon

Things to remember

- Circumcision remains a common procedure
- In Australia, approximately 20% of males under 20 years of age would be circumcised
- The procedure is not available in the public hospital system in Australia unless there is a medical indication.

Further information

- Circumcision – A guide for parents
<https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/circumcision-brochure.pdf>
- Circumcision in boys
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/circumcision-in-boys/>
- Circumcision in men
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/circumcision-in-men/>
- Male infant circumcision
http://www.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/files/fact-sheets/male_infant_circumcision-en.pdf