

# Circumcision - Making a Difficult Decision

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If you have a son, one of the most emotionally wrenching decisions you may face in the first days of his life is whether to have him circumcised or not. It is especially difficult when mother and father have different opinions; each parent may have excellent reasons for the way they feel. Medical studies will influence your decision, although most parents will also consider their feelings and family history, especially since the facts are so confusing. Here are some of the benefits and risks for your consideration.

## **BENEFITS**

The benefits of circumcision are hotly debated in the medical community, but even opponents of circumcision grant that there are a few benefits.

## **URINARY TRACT INFECTIONS (UTI)**

Circumcision seems to greatly reduce the incidence of urinary tract infections in baby boys. Although there is only a 1% chance of a baby with an intact penis contracting a urinary tract infection (which means a 99% chance of not contracting a UTI), the infection can be quite serious for babies who get it. The chances of a circumcised baby getting a UTI are 0.1%, about ten times less.

## **LATER FORESKIN PROBLEMS**

Circumcision completely eliminates the chances of later problems of the foreskin, such as inability to retract the foreskin after puberty or inflammation of the foreskin. Again, though, the chances are only 5-10% that an uncircumcised male will ever have one of these problems, which means that 90%-95% of intact men will never need to be circumcised for a later foreskin problem.

## **SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES**

There is some evidence that circumcision may reduce the chances of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, although anti-circumcision advocates strenuously protest. However, circumcision cannot prevent sexually transmitted diseases; the only protection against AIDS and other STDs is not to engage in unprotected sexual activities, and it would be foolish to believe that circumcision offered some sort of magic shield.

## **PENILE AND CERVICAL CANCER**

Although there are some studies that show a correlation between circumcision and lower rates of penile and cervical cancer, the interpretation of those studies is highly questionable. The American Cancer Society recently requested the American Academy of Pediatrics to stop using this as a reason for circumcision. Circumcision is not effective in preventing these cancers; avoiding smoking and unprotected sexual relations with multiple partners is.

## **SURGICAL RISKS**

The circumcision surgery itself is not fool-proof and carries risks of bleeding, infection, and damage to the penis. The risk of complications from the surgery is 0.2 - 0.6%.

## **PAIN**

For many years, doctors told parents that babies were incapable of feeling the pain of circumcision, which was probably so the doctors themselves could stand to do the surgery with no anesthesia. Now, of course, we know that babies can certainly feel the pain of the surgery. However, most circumcisions are still done without anesthesia, because there are risks to anesthesia. Some physicians use a local anesthetic spray or cream, and if you choose to have your son circumcised you may want to ask for it.

## **MYTHS**

### **Myth #1: Caring for an uncircumcised penis is more difficult.**

The truth is that there is no special care for the intact penis until puberty; gentle washing with soap and water in the bath is all that is necessary. At puberty, boys must retract the foreskin and wash beneath it, but by that time they should be washing themselves!

### **Myth #2: If your son looks different from the other boys, he will be teased.**

Boys will always look for differences and tease each other; if it's not the condition of the foreskin it will be the size or the skin color. Most boys live through this teasing, and it's impossible to predict how the majority of boys in your son's locker room will look. In California, your son will look like about half the other boys either way.

### **Myth #3: Mutilating your son's genitals is a violation of his human rights.**

The unfortunate truth is that parents are forced to make many decisions for their children during infancy and childhood. Circumcision is no different from any other choice; parents must weigh the pros and cons and make their own decisions based on what they feel is best for their sons. No outside person has the right to tell you that your thoughtful decisions are abusive.

The decision of whether or not to circumcise is one that is yours alone. Talk to your pediatrician, read the studies for yourself, and take your family history and cultural practices into consideration. When in doubt, wait. You can always choose circumcision later, but you can't really undo it. Whatever you decide, you have a greater than 90% chance of having no complications. Make the decision with your baby's best interest at heart; you will make the right choice.