

Coffee with the Cantor

2017

Hazzan Rob Menes

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Circumcision (Brit Milah)

Jewish and Non-Jewish Views on Circumcision

A Guide for Prospective Jewish Parents Rabbi Moshe Shulman, Certified Mohel

A brit performed according to Jewish tradition links the child to his Jewish brothers throughout the world; properly planned, it will forever be a source of happy memories for you and your whole family. May the Almighty grant you much *nachat* from this child, and all future children! ***Mazal Tov!***

THE HISTORY OF BRIT MILAH:

"And G-d spoke to Abraham saying: ...This is my covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and thy seed after you -every male child among you shall be circumcised." (Gen. 17:12) For 3500 years, since the time of our forefather Abraham, the Jewish people have observed the ritual of circumcision as the fundamental sign of the covenant between G-d and Israel. Known in Hebrew as *Brit Milah*, "the Covenant of Circumcision", it is considered much more than a simple medical procedure. *Brit Milah* is considered the sign of a new-born child's entry into the Jewish tradition. For millennia, in every country where Jews have lived, they have always practiced this ritual, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. Perhaps more than any other ritual, *Brit Milah* is the ultimate affirmation of Jewish identity.

PROCEDURE & ANESTHETIC:

The procedure involved in *Brit Milah* differs from medical circumcision in that heavy clamping or other interventional instruments are forbidden. The *Mohel* (Ritual Circumciser) uses a protective shield to ensure the utmost safety for the child, and then cleanses the incision through a uniquely Jewish practice called *m'tzitzah*.

The procedure is extremely quick, and relatively painless. According to most Rabbinic authorities, Jewish law **does** allow the use of a topical anaesthetic cream (EMLA®, or MAXELINE®). Some *Mohalim* (ritual circumcisers), **including myself**, use this anaesthetic cream routinely, with the approval of the family's personal physician or paediatrician.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE MOHEL:

Every *Brit Milah* must be performed by a properly trained and certified ***Mohel*** (Ritual Circumciser). A *Mohel* is formally trained both in circumcision techniques as well as in Jewish law and tradition. While he certainly must be expert in the latest medically approved surgical and sterilization procedures, being a *Mohel* requires much more than surgical and medical skill. Jewish law sees the moment of *Brit Milah* as



having a great spiritual impact upon the child. The *Mohel*, therefore, must also be a person of great piety and religiosity. He must be a G-d fearing practicing, Sabbath observant Jew, who performs the *Brit Milah* in accordance with the intentions as well as the methods of Jewish law. In this way the *Mohel* is a specialist in the spiritual aspects as well as the medical aspects of circumcision.

WHERE & WHEN?

The brit milah of a healthy baby is always done on the 8th day, even Shabbat or Yom Kippur, and only during daylight hours! This 8th day is calculated to include the day of birth. If a baby is born, for example, on a Tuesday afternoon, under normally circumstances the *Brit* would be the following Tuesday, any time during the day. (There is a tradition to do the *Brit* as early in the day as possible.) A *Brit Milah* performed prior to this 8th day, or at night, does not comply with Jewish law, and is not considered a valid *Brit*.

A *Brit* of a baby delivered by caesarean section, although normally performed on the 8th day, may not be performed on the Sabbath or Jewish holiday. In this case, the *Brit* is delayed until the next weekday.

Reasons to delay: A *Brit Milah* is never performed if it poses any danger to the infant. The doctor and/or *mohel's* advice to delay a *Brit* for health reasons should always be heeded. In case of jaundice (yellow pigmentation of the skin), the brit cannot be performed; it is delayed until the bilirubin in the blood drops to a safe level. The brit may then be performed without endangering the child. In cases of some illnesses, a delay of seven days following full recovery is required. It is forbidden to postpone the brit for any reason other than health of the child, or in order to obtain a proper *Mohel* (see above). It is the responsibility of the *Mohel*, in consultation with the doctor and the family, to determine if a delay is necessary according to Jewish law.

The *Brit* may be performed in a Synagogue, social hall, or in a private home with complete safety.

THE BRIT MILAH CEREMONY:

The baby is brought in to the room, carried by the *kvatter* and *kvatterin*, considered by many to be the godparents.

Two chairs are prepared for the *Brit*. The first is for the *Sandek*, the individual who holds the baby on their knees during the actual circumcision. The lap of the *Sandek* is considered analogous to the altar of the Temple itself. It is considered a great honour to be the *Sandek* because there is a Cabbalistic tradition that links the soul of the *Sandek* with the child. In this way, the *Sandek* is considered the spiritual mentor of the child. In many instances, one of the grandfathers serves as the *Sandek*.

The second chair is set aside for the spirit of Elijah the Prophet, the "Angel of the Covenant". According to Jewish tradition, Elijah comes to every circumcision to testify before the Almighty to the commitment of the Jewish people to this great mitzvah throughout the generations. During the ceremony, just prior to the *Brit* itself, the baby is placed on the chair of Elijah, and the *Mohel* recites a special prayer asking for the spirit of Elijah to stand over him as he performs the *Brit*.

After the *Mohel* has performed the brit, a special blessing is recited upon a cup of wine, and the baby is given his Hebrew name. It is customary to serve refreshments or a meal after the brit, and this is considered a *seudat mitzvah*, part of the mitzvah. (Obviously all food served should be kosher.)

Ideally, a *minyan* should be present for a *Brit*, although this is **not** a pre-requisite.

BABY NAMING:

In the Torah it says that G-d changed Abraham's name from Avram to Avraham at the time of his circumcision. In keeping with that tradition, a Jewish boy is given his Hebrew name at the time of his *Brit Milah*. Judaism places a great deal of significance on a child's Hebrew name. It is often customary to name the child after someone who led a righteous life so that the child will try to emulate that individual. Ashkenazi Jews often name their children after a dearly departed relative, while Sephardic Jews sometimes name their children in honour of living relatives. In the case of someone who died at a young age, another name referring to life, or the name of a person who lived a full life is added.

The Hebrew naming of a baby girl should take place at the first occasion after the baby is born when the father can be called to the Torah. At that time a special prayer is recited on behalf of the mother and the baby, and a Hebrew name is given to the child. The guidelines for naming a baby girl are the same as for naming a baby boy.

Tuesday 13 October 2009

Circumcision: cut the crap

'Intactivists' who claim that being circumcised abused their human rights, and ruined their sex lives, should get a grip.

Nancy McDermott

Reading [Ethan Epstein's arguments](#) on *spiked* against the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) proposal to push routine male infant circumcision on the American public I was reminded why I so hate The Circumcision Discussion.

As the mother of two sons, and the moderator of a parenting list serve here in New York, I have been party to The Circumcision Discussion far more often than anyone who isn't a paediatrician or a *mohel* should be. When the topic comes up - often in the context of a family looking for someone to perform a circumcision - discussion becomes instantly polarised.

It tends to start out relatively civil, usually with duelling research studies showing the supposed risks and benefits on either side, but then ends badly, with accusations of child abuse from one side and charges of twisting the scientific data or thinly veiled anti-Semitism from the other.

The main problem with The Circumcision Discussion in general, and with Ethan Epstein's article in particular, is the appeal to Science with a capital S to validate what is essentially a personal decision for parents. There isn't really overwhelming evidence for or against infant circumcision, which makes this issue quite unambiguously a matter of preference, and more so than some other issues such as breastfeeding or vaccination where the scientific research is abundant.

But that hasn't stopped Epstein from trying to use Science to support what is essentially his own particular set of prejudices. In the end, his attack on infant circumcision is not based so much on evidence but rather on a degraded notion of personal autonomy that is contemptuous of parents and reduces the whole parent/child relationship to the matter of a

few inches of skin.

Epstein is right to point out that we should be sceptical of the impulse to politicise intimate aspects of our personal lives. As we've seen in discussions around breastfeeding, official recommendations based on scientific research are often less evidence-based than they appear.

Epstein's criticism of the CDC's rationale for changing its recommendation is also essentially right. Routine circumcision probably isn't a particularly useful strategy for preventing the spread of AIDS in the United States. There's also not enough evidence to say definitively that it offers significant health benefits in other areas. The problem is that, having undermined the CDC's dubious case for routine circumcision, Epstein then goes on to erect his own equally shaky case against it.

Take for instance his attempt to establish – or rather to assert – that male infant circumcision is on a par with 'female circumcision'. It's a comparison that defies even a basic familiarity with human anatomy. 'Female circumcision', or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as it is usually called, involves the removal of some or all of a woman's external genitalia and is associated with side effects like intense pain, infection, haemorrhaging, infertility and urinary incontinence. Comparable surgery in a man would involve the removal of most of the penis and the scrotum. But male circumcision as it is currently practiced consists of the removal of the foreskin and nothing else. Statistically it is a very safe procedure with few complications (in some cases, there may be minor bleeding or a local infection) (1).

In comparing FGM with infant male circumcision, Epstein is seeking to establish a moral equivalency between the two. FGM is not just, as he writes, 'an article of faith for international development agencies'; it's also a moral absolute he wants to cash in on, even to the point of referring to it by the outmoded term 'female circumcision' so that it *sounds* comparable to male circumcision. If FGM is seen as a violation of the human rights of women and girls and male circumcision is, as Epstein would have it, just the same, then anyone who circumcises their son is violating his human rights.

Epstein doesn't do much better when he tries to show evidence for psychological trauma and sexual dysfunction as a result of circumcision. He relies on a 2002 paper written by self-proclaimed 'intactivists' which indicates that some men enjoy sex less after circumcision. Had he more objectively investigated what he says is 'quite evidentially true', he might have come across any number of studies that show the opposite. My favourite is a large-scale study from 2008 (with over 4,500 participants) in which an overwhelming majority of Kenyan men reported no difference in sexual satisfaction or function after their circumcisions (2).

The results of circumcision are at the very least far from universal. Like the CDC's rationale for promoting circumcision, the 'Science' at the heart of Epstein's argument is less straightforward than it appears.

It is striking that midway through Epstein's article the CDC's proposal to 'promote' infant

circumcision mysteriously transforms into a plan to ‘mandate’ infant circumcision. This is not a slip and it’s not just that Epstein has got his facts wrong (although he has). Rather he makes this change in terminology because he isn’t really talking about the CDC at all any more. He’s talking about parents. For anti-circumcision activists, *all* infant circumcision is mandated in the sense that infants do not consent to it.

On one level Epstein is right. It is of course impossible for an infant to consent to anything, and parents make decisions large and small on behalf of their children all the time. Some of these decisions affect their future and many are far more difficult than the question of whether or not to have your infant circumcised.

I’m reminded of a friend whose daughter was born with a birthmark that covered her left eye and much of her face. It could be treated with laser surgery, but it would require multiple procedures and it would be painful. My friend and her partner agonised over the decision. Would having the surgery feed into a sense that there is only one way to look? Would it make their daughter’s life easier not having a disfigurement? How much would it hurt her? Their friends urged them to go ahead and in the end they did opt to have the birthmark removed. Flash forward to the birth of the couple’s son a few years later. Their friends balked at their decision to circumcise their son even though it was important to them as Jews and it would be over and done with very quickly. My friend told me she couldn’t help but think it ironic that her friends who were anti-circumcision ‘didn’t think there was anything wrong with burning the skin on my child’s face, repeatedly, as long as it made [the birthmark] go away’.

Many of the choices we make as parents profoundly affect our children. But when we look back at our own lives it is often things that didn’t concern us directly at all that had the greatest impact - things like parents’ decision to divorce, to change jobs, or to emigrate. As children we rarely have any say and yet we manage to adapt and often to flourish. One of the major reasons we are able to develop this resilience is because we can depend on our parents. It is the parent/child relationship - each one unique and dynamic, a complex mix of love and trust, and mutually crazy-making - that creates the sense of inner confidence that helps us learn shape our own destinies.

By counterpoising the ‘personal autonomy’ of an infant to the judgment of his parents, Epstein and others who campaign against circumcision reduce the relationship between parents and their sons to one moment; a moment that forever defines the child as victim and the parent as victimiser regardless even of what the boy himself thinks about it later in his life. Once a victim, always a victim.

There are all sorts of reasons why parents do or don’t circumcise their sons. For some it is the embodiment of their faith, for others it is simply custom. For some the thought of subjecting their child to any unnecessary pain or alteration is unacceptable. The important point is that the choice takes place within the context of the parent-child relationship. The CDC is not, as Epstein implies, planning to circumcise every male infant in the United States, but the change in its recommendation, just like every other official pronouncement about the right way to

raise children, should be greeted with scepticism. Not because, as Epstein argues, it might lead parents to make a wrong choice, but because it questions their right to make choices in the first place.

Nancy McDermott is a writer and mother based in New York. Nancy gratefully acknowledges Dale Rosenberg for her generous contribution of time, stories, references and insights.

A STRANGE ATTACHMENT, by Nancy McDermott

It wasn't a long ago that The Circumcision Discussion wasn't a discussion at all. I conducted a quick poll of every Gentile woman from my mother's generation I could get hold of and asked them how they had made the decision about whether to circumcise their sons. I discovered they almost universally couldn't remember. As my mother told me: 'It's just what we did back then.' Were they concerned about masturbation or promiscuity, the classic justifications the Victorians offered for routine circumcision? 'God, no! I'm not sure I even knew what masturbation was back then', admitted one lady.

The origins of the custom are notorious - it started with the Victorians who believed circumcision could 'cure' everything from paralysis to masturbation. But by the 1960s, when 90 per cent of boys in the US were circumcised, it was 'just what we did'.

In light of the present panic about the CDC's recommendations to introduce routine infant circumcisions it is ironic that it was physicians who first began to reassess this custom in the 1970s. They reconsidered their position not in response to an outcry from the public but because new evidence became available that undermined the procedure's perceived health advantages.

In 1975, the American Academy of Pediatrics concluded that there were no valid indications for introducing routine circumcision of infants but added that 'traditional, cultural, and religious factors play a role' in parents' decisions. The job of the physician, it said, was to present parents with 'factual and informative medical options regarding circumcision'. However, 'the final decision is theirs [parents]', and should be based on true informed consent'.

By the mid-1980s, however, infant circumcision had transformed from a matter of a parents' choice to a human rights issue championed by a network of non-governmental organisations and a coterie of militant 'intactivists'. The anti-circumcision movement grew out of several important trends in American society: feminist disenchantment with the mainstream medical establishment with regard to reproductive issues; the rise of the gay rights movement; the popularisation of infant determinism and new research into brain development.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an important strand within feminism eschewed obstetrics as an unnecessary medicalisation of the natural process of childbirth. If epidurals and Caesarean sections were deemed largely unnecessary, circumcision, for which there were no clear medical justifications, was simply beyond the pale.

As for the gay liberation movement, it was concerned, almost by definition, with the free exercise of masculine sexuality. Infant circumcision was perceived as an actual and symbolic external constraint on the rights of the individual in relation to his intimate life.

Finally, and most importantly, the rise of infant determinism in tandem with new theories of brain development gave rise to the notion that people could be profoundly negatively shaped by events that occurred in childhood (even if they cannot consciously remember them). Infant determinism took this Freudian idea to the extreme, focusing on developments in infancy or even before. New research into brain function seemed to explain how early events like circumcision could result in the 'perinatal encoding of the brain with violence'.

It was a small but important step because it seemed to imbue opposition to circumcisions with an air of moral authority derived from science. It meant that circumcised men bore the neurological scars of the procedure *whether they knew it or not*, whether they felt them or not.

It was a compelling idea for many. Psychologists began to 'discover' post-traumatic stress disorder from infant circumcision and a small subculture of men have genuinely come to believe that their circumcision as infants has negatively affected everything from their sex lives and relationships to their academic performance and career choices. Some have even gone as far as electing to endure foreskin 'restoration', a lengthy process involving tape.

If it hadn't been for the rise of the parenting expert and parenting lifestyles, intactivism might have remained a quirky subculture with its lists of 'intact' and 'restored' celebrities and silly slogan T-shirts ('May the Forceskin be with You' or 'I Wish I Was Intact' - featuring a graphic of a sad penis).

Since the days of Dr Spock's *Baby and Childcare*, there has been an explosion of experts offering advice on childrearing. The net effect has been to make parents more self-conscious about how they bring up their children than ever before. Parenting lifestyles – such as attachment parenting or holistic parenting - hold out the promise of a shared philosophy for bringing up children, and of a life in which even the smallest decisions we make are imbued with moral import. From that perspective, intactivism and parenting lifestyles seem made for one another. For intactivists you are your foreskin; with attachment parenting, you are your son's foreskin, too.

Previously on *spiked*

Ethan Epstein argued that the US proposal to circumcise every infant male on health grounds was illiberal and harmful. **Dr Michael Fitzpatrick** showed how the AIDS epidemic was a glorious myth. **Stuart Derbyshire** argued that the UN was making AIDS in Africa worse. **Ann Furedi** wrote that chlamydia is the new medical justification for not having sex. Or read more at *spiked* issue Health.

(1) See [The Center for Disease control Factsheet on circumcision](#). (2) [Adult Male Circumcision: Effects on Sexual Function and Sexual satisfaction in Kisumu, Kenya](#), by JN Krieger, SD Mehta, RC Bailey, K Agot, JO Ndinya-Achola, C Parker and S Moses,

Department of Urology, University of Washington, Seattle **reprinted from:**
<http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/7533/>

Male Circumcision: Should It Now Be A Crime?

posted by Maurice Bernstein, M.D., 2006

Male circumcision is without doubt one of the more controversial issues along with abortion within the cultures within the United States. There are ethical, legal, medical, cultural and religious as well as, I presume, political aspects to the issue. This topic was brought up on my blog posting "[I Hate Doctors](#)" but I felt it was an important topic to be discussed on a posting more specific to the circumcision issue. Other constructive discussions of "hateful" concerns and experiences about physician behavior can continue to be discussed there but I would like circumcision issues discussed here. I would also appreciate comments and arguments here from those visitors who see some good or value in circumcision or would find defects, legal or ethical, in the law requested below. ..Maurice.

The [MGMBill.org](#), is attempting to get a bill passed in Congress to make male genital circumcision a crime in addition to what many feel to be mutilation acts on females. Below is the proposed congressional bill which the group hopes will become law. According to their website, "the MGM Bill proposal has been submitted to every member of Congress three times: on February 23, 2004, February 28, 2005, and February 6, 2006. In 2006, our state offices also submitted state level MGM Bill proposals to every member in 15 U.S. state legislatures."

Genital Mutilation Prohibition Act IN THE HOUSE AND SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

A Bill

Submitted to Congress on February 6, 2006

Entitled the "Federal Prohibition of Genital Mutilation Act of 2006"

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, to amend the Female Genital Mutilation Act of 1996 (a) so that boys, intersex individuals, and nonconsenting adults may also be protected from genital mutilation; (b) to increase the maximum punishment of offense to 14 years imprisonment, (c) to include assistance or facilitation of genital mutilation of children or nonconsenting adults as an offense, and (d) to prohibit persons in the U.S. from arranging or facilitating genital mutilation of children and nonconsenting adults in foreign countries.

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE

This Act may be cited as the "Federal Prohibition of Genital Mutilation Act of 2006".

SECTION 2. TITLE 18 AMENDMENT

(A) IN GENERAL.--Title 18, Part I, Chapter 7, Section 116 of the United States Code is amended by revising the text to read as follows:

"116. GENITAL MUTILATION

"(a) Except as provided in subsection (b), whoever knowingly circumcises, excises, cuts, or mutilates the whole or any part of the labia majora, labia minora, clitoris, vulva, breasts, nipples, foreskin, glans, testicles, penis, ambiguous genitalia, hermaphroditic genitalia, or genital organs of another person who has not attained the age of 18 years or on any nonconsenting adult; whoever prematurely and forcibly retracts the penile or clitoral prepuce of another person who has not attained the age of 18 years or on any nonconsenting adult, except to the extent that the prepuce has already separated from the glans; whoever knowingly assists with or facilitates any of these acts; or whoever arranges, plans, aids, abets, counsels, facilitates, or procures a genital mutilation operation on another person outside the United States who has not attained the age of 18 years or on any nonconsenting adult outside the United States shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 14 years, or both.

"(b) A surgical operation is not a violation of this section if the operation is (1) performed on a person who has not attained the age of 18 years and is necessary to the physical health of the person on whom it is performed because of a clear, compelling, and immediate medical need with no less-destructive alternative treatment available, and is performed by a person licensed in the place of its performance as a medical practitioner; (2) performed on an adult who is physically unable to give consent and there is a clear, compelling, and immediate medical need with no less-destructive alternative treatment available, and is performed by a person licensed in the place of its performance as a medical practitioner; or (3) performed on a person in labor or who has just given birth and is performed for medical purposes connected with that labor or birth because of a clear, compelling, and immediate medical need with no less-destructive alternative treatment available, and is performed by a person licensed in the place it is performed as a medical practitioner, midwife, or person in training to become such a practitioner or midwife.

"(c) In applying subsection (b), no account shall be taken of the effect on the person on whom the operation is to be performed of any belief on the part of that or any other person that the operation is required as a matter of custom or ritual.

(B) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.--The table of sections at the beginning of Chapter 7 of Title 18, Part I, of the United States Code, is amended by revising Section 116 to read "116. Genital mutilation."

SECTION 3. INFORMATION AND EDUCATION REGARDING GENITAL MUTILATION

(A) IN GENERAL. -- The Secretary of Health and Human Services shall carry out the following activities:

(1) Compile data on the number of persons of all sexes living in the United States who have been subjected to genital mutilation (whether in the United States or in their countries of origin), including a specification of the number of children under the age of 18 who have been subjected to such mutilation.

(2) Identify communities in the United States that practice genital mutilation, and design and carry out outreach activities to educate individuals in the communities on the physical and psychological effects of such practice. Such outreach activities shall be designed and implemented in collaboration with representatives of the ethnic groups practicing such mutilation and with representatives of organizations with expertise in preventing such practice.

(3) Develop recommendations for the education of students of schools of medicine and osteopathic medicine regarding genital mutilation and complications arising from such mutilation, as well as complications arising from premature forcible retraction of the prepuce. Such recommendations shall be disseminated to such schools.

(B) IN GENERAL. -- The President shall carry out the following activities:

(1) Seek to end the practice of genital mutilation worldwide through the active cooperation and participation of governments in countries where genital mutilation takes place.

(2) Steps to end the practice of genital mutilation should include--

(a) encouraging nations to establish clear policies against genital mutilation and enforcing existing laws which prohibit it;

(b) assisting nations in creating culturally appropriate outreach programs that include education and counseling about the dangers of genital mutilation to people of all ages; and

(c) ensuring that all appropriate programs in which the United States participates include a component pertaining to genital mutilation, so as to ensure consistency across the spectrum of health and child related programs conducted in any country in which genital mutilation is known to be a problem.

(C) DEFINITIONS. -- For purpose of this Act, the term "genital mutilation" means the removal or cutting (or both) of the whole or part of the clitoris, labia minora, labia majora, vulva, breasts, nipples, foreskin, glans, testicles, penis, ambiguous genitalia, hermaphroditic

genitalia, or genital organs. The term "premature forcible retraction of the penile or clitoral prepuce" means forced retraction of the prepuce from the glans, except to the extent that the prepuce has already separated from the glans. The term "prepuce" means foreskin. The term "adult" means a person who has attained the age of 18 years. The term "nonconsenting" means not wishing to undergo genital mutilation.

From MGMBill.com

Frequently Asked Questions

What is male circumcision?

Male circumcision is the [surgical removal](#) of the [foreskin](#). In the United States today, all forms of child [female circumcision](#) are prohibited under [Title 18](#) of the U.S. Code. Males are not included in that legislation, however, and as a result nearly [33% of American boys](#) are still circumcised, with wide variations among individual states.

What is the function of the male foreskin?

The [male foreskin](#) performs a number of [functions](#). First, it directly enhances sexual pleasure via specialized erogenous nerve endings such as the [frenulum](#), the [ridged band](#), and stretch receptors called [Meissner's corpuscles](#). The foreskin also serves to protect the moist, mucous membrane of the glans (the "head" of the penis) and the inner foreskin from outside elements, similar to the way the [female foreskin](#) protects the clitoris. When the foreskin is removed, the penis is transformed from an internal organ into an external one, initiating a desensitizing process known as [keratinization](#). Keratin is a tough, skin-like substance similar to a callus that forms on top of the nerve endings of the glans, resulting in significant loss of sexual sensitivity. The foreskin also provides a [gliding mechanism](#) during sexual intercourse that reduces friction and locks in moisture, acting as a natural lubricant. The foreskin provides a number of [other important functions](#) as well.

Why would anyone cut off such a valuable body part?

The world origins of circumcision are unknown. However, circumcision began in the United States [in the late 1800's](#) largely because some doctors thought that it prevented masturbation, which at the time was thought to be harmful. But once that and [other myths](#) were proven wrong, new reasons were created to perpetuate circumcision, most notably that a circumcised penis is [more hygienic](#) than an intact penis, that it makes boys [look the same as their fathers](#) or others in their community, and for [religious reasons](#). [Medicaid reimbursement](#) for circumcision in [thirty-two states](#) and a lucrative market for [infant foreskins](#) also provides [financial incentives](#) for circumcision.

Haven't some newer studies shown that circumcised men are less likely to contract HIV and penile cancer?

Although some new studies suggest that circumcision may [reduce susceptibility to HIV](#) and [penile cancer](#) later in life, those findings are not a valid reason to amputate a healthy, functioning body part of a child. Similar studies show that [female circumcision may reduce HIV](#) transmission, but nearly all physicians agree that any type of forced female genital cutting is unethical. Doctors don't cut off the breasts of baby girls to help prevent breast cancer, either, and [medical ethicists](#) believe that the male foreskin should be treated no differently. It is also important to note that [proponents of female circumcision](#) often use [medical reasons](#) to justify cutting off parts of girls' genitals, but those arguments are rightly condemned in most countries.

Does circumcision cause psychological harm?

Many men who are circumcised suffer the same psychological effects [found in rape victims](#). A [sense of great loss](#) and feelings of [anger, distrust, and grief](#) are common among circumcised men who are aware of the functions that the foreskin performs. [Problems with intimacy](#) in adult life, long term [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), and [feelings of personal powerlessness](#) are also reported by men when discussing their circumcisions.

Can circumcision be reversed?

The unique nerve endings that are cut off during circumcision cannot be restored. However, other significant damage from circumcision can be reversed through a method called [non-surgical foreskin restoration](#), which involves [stretching the remaining shaft skin](#) over the glans to grow new skin. By keeping the glans and remaining inner foreskin area covered and protected, the keratin that built up over the lifetime of the victim slowly peels away, resulting in a significant improvement to sexual sensitivity. The natural gliding mechanism can also be restored to some extent, provided that [enough new skin](#) can be regrown.

Isn't it up to parents to decide what is right for their own child?

Unless there is a [compelling medical reason](#) to do so, no one has the right to cut off the working body part of a child. Genital mutilation is done for social, "hygienic", or religious reasons, and [no national medical organization in the world](#) supports forced infant circumcision as a beneficial health measure. We don't allow girls to be circumcised because we know that it is harmful to their physical and mental well being, and boys should be afforded [equal protection](#) of the law.

What about misinformed parents who have already had their son(s) circumcised?

Many doctors continue to misinform parents by telling them that circumcision is harmless or even beneficial, so oftentimes parents are not to blame. We suggest that parents take the time to sit down with their son and explain that they never would have agreed to the circumcision procedure had they known it was going to hurt him. Explaining that some damage from circumcision can be reversed

through non-surgical foreskin restoration is also good advice.

What about expecting parents who have already circumcised their first son(s)?

Some parents, even those who have newfound doubts about the ethics of circumcision, are tempted to circumcise their new baby boy if their other sons are already circumcised. They may worry that the older boys will resent them for allowing their penises to be cut while leaving their younger brother's penis intact. But continuing the cycle of genital mutilation will not make things better. The best thing for these parents to do is to leave their new son intact and explain to the older sons that when they were born, many people believed that circumcision was a harmless or even beneficial procedure. Now that more is known about circumcision, however, it is no longer routinely done and that is why their younger brother is intact.

What should Jewish parents do if they have a boy?

Some of the most [vocal criticism](#) of circumcision comes from [within the Jewish community](#) itself. This is because many Jews have actually witnessed the painful cries of baby boys as parts of their penises are cut off in the name of religion. As a peaceful alternative, [more and more Jewish parents](#) are calling for a [Brit Shalom](#) to replace the [Brit Milah](#). A Brit Shalom is a non-cutting [naming ceremony](#) that welcomes baby boys into the world with love, not mutilation. Many [celebrants](#) now specialize in performing this non-violent ritual.

Are there any alternatives for Muslim parents?

Although Muslims represent the [largest single group](#) of circumcised men in the world, not all Muslim men are circumcised. Ethnic Chams substitute [non-violent rituals](#), and [converts to Islam](#) are not required to undergo circumcision. [Muslim intactivists](#) are also increasingly [speaking out](#) against the [harmful effects](#) of [Islamic ritual circumcision](#), helping to provide support to Muslim parents who choose not to circumcise their sons.

What can I do?

Circumcision is perpetuated by silence. When the topic is brought up in conversation, many people react by changing the subject or by making jokes. When you hear circumcision being discussed, don't be afraid to tell others about the negative consequences that it has on each of its victims. In addition, [take action](#) by writing your congressional and state officials to voice your support for the bill proposals on this website. Lastly, if your son was circumcised and you feel that you were misled by your doctor, hospital, or religious advisor, you may want to [file a lawsuit](#) against them seeking damages. If you yourself are a victim of circumcision, you may want to consider [suing](#) the person or organization that circumcised you.

If the MGM Bill becomes law, would men be allowed to have a circumcision if they want one?

Yes, men would be free to undergo circumcision for any reason once they reach eighteen years of age. The purpose of the MGM Bill is to protect males from being circumcised against their will, not to prevent them from altering their own genitals if they wish to do so.

Where can I find more information on circumcision?

To learn more about circumcision, please click the links on our [Resources](#) page. A number of different [books](#) on circumcision are also available.

About Us

MGMbill.org is a private non-profit organization based in San Diego, California, seeking to pass a law that will end the practice of male genital mutilation (circumcision) in the United States of America. Currently, girls are protected from genital mutilation by U.S. federal law, but boys are not.

Although legal protection of only girls from circumcision would seem to violate the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the fact remains that it is still widely considered to be legal in this country to mutilate a boy's genitals in the name of social custom, hygiene, religion, or any other reason. This is true despite the well documented lifelong damage that male circumcision causes each of its victims.

It's a practice we need to end now.

A blue ink signature of Matthew Hess, written in a cursive style.

(libertarian, running for governor of Colorado)

Matthew Hess

President

Note the Facebook page:

[Christians Against Circumcision ~ Jesus Was an Intactivist](#)

April 30, 2011 ·

Bible Verses Against Circumcision:

Behold, I, Paul, tell you that if you be circumcised, Christ will be of no advantage to you. – Galatians 5:2

Continued in Comments Below. . .

<http://www.noharmm.org/christianparent.htm>

Circumcision and the Christian Parent

[Rosemary Romberg](#) - Anchorage, AK

If you are familiar with the current arguments opposing routine infant circumcision, you are already aware that babies experience a severe amount of pain when circumcised, the foreskin serves a protective and useful purpose as it covers the more delicate glans, cleanliness of the intact penis is an extremely simple matter, some babies experience serious complications of the operation, any diseases that circumcision has been purported to "prevent" (such as penile cancer) can easily be prevented by non-surgical means, and that babies are human beings with inalienable rights including freedom from unnecessary pain and body alteration.

However, some Christian parents, even after hearing and taking this information to heart, may still retain a *feeling* that circumcision must be a good thing to do simply because of its association with the Bible. Somehow for many people (at least in North America) the *word* "circumcised" sounds good. Therefore, many facts, as directly concern Christians, must be examined more closely.

What does the Old Testament say about circumcision?

At the time of Abraham, circumcision was established as a covenant between God and the Hebrew people. (Genesis 17: 10-14) There are many speculations as to the reasons and background of this particular practice. Many historians believe that the early Hebrews practiced a simple gashing of the foreskin rather than the more drastic and traumatic practice that is done today with clamps and scalpels. Circumcision was also practiced by many other primitive tribes, well before the time of Abraham. Its actual beginnings were Pagan in origin. Most observant Jews (who accept only the Old Testament as part of their faith) still circumcise their baby boys for this reason. (This ritual, called a bris, takes place on the eighth day of the baby's life. It is usually done

by a Jewish practitioner, known as a mohel who specializes in circumcisions. This is very much different from the medical routine performed hospitals on non-Jewish babies.)

Christians are not bound by Old Testament practices.

When the growing concern against routine circumcision began, we focused only on the medical and social concerns surrounding non-ritual circumcision. We were always careful to exempt Jewish concerns as a separate matter, believing that religious considerations were more delicate issues which only the Jews themselves should deal with. Over the years, however, groups such as Peaceful Beginnings and NOCIRC have been approached by increasing numbers of Jews who do question this aspect of their faith with much sensitivity and concern. There is now a growing network of support for the "Alternative Bris" ceremony, in which the ritual is performed without cutting the baby. [NOHARMM note: see our **Religion-Judaism** section for resources.]

Christians are not bound by Old Testament practices. Many people now realize that there were many customs and practices that were common in Old Testament times, such as burning up birds and animals as ritual sacrifice, which may have made sense to those people at that time, but have little relevancy or acceptability today.

What does the New Testament say about circumcision?

Jesus Christ is the New Covenant, rendering all of the Old Testament practices, including the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision, null and void.

When the Gospel was to be spread to the Gentile world, during the time of St. Paul, circumcision of Gentile converts was a matter of intense debate. Circumcision was dangerous, painful, and culturally repugnant to the Greeks and Romans. Early Christian church authorities quickly decided that circumcision was unnecessary.

"For freedom, Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we can wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." Galatians 5:1-6

"It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that would compel you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh. But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God." Galatians 6:12-16.

"Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh." Philippians 3:2-3.

This was nearly 2,000 years ago. Throughout most of history, and in most parts of the world today, Christians are rarely circumcised. In many cultures, people are often not even aware of what circumcision is.

Doesn't it say in the Bible that circumcision is cleaner?

There is no place in the Bible that states that a male is cleaner if he is circumcised. There are, however, many places in which the *concept* of circumcision is used *metaphorically*. In Deuteronomy 10:16 people are admonished to "circumcise the foreskins of their hearts." Jeremiah 6:10 berates the unrepentant who cannot hear because their "ears are uncircumcised." In Acts 7:51, St. Stephen declared "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Ghost." And in Romans 2:29 St. Paul states "He is a Jew, that is one inwardly: and the circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter."

Much of this sounds weird to modern day people, but the writers were simply using a concept that would have had meaning to the people at that time. They were not proclaiming that there was *actually* any value or purification to cutting off any part of the body, but were admonishing people to apply that type of belief to their inner selves instead.

Well, after all, Jesus was circumcised.

Jesus was circumcised because he was a Jew. Mary and Joseph had little choice about the matter in that time and place.

At one time the Catholic church observed January 1st (8 days after Christmas) as the "Feast of the Circumcision", commemorating this event as the first of his blood sacrifice and martyrdom.

Although Christian churches today rarely focus on this, at one time early Christian writers gave much attention to the circumcision of Christ - not as any perfecting or purification of the body, but as an act of further debasement to which he submitted after assuming human form.

"Already diminished by assuming our flesh, Christ further lessens himself by receiving the circumcision. God's Son had abased himself one degree beneath the angels in taking on human nature, and this day, by accepting the remedy for our corruption, he descends a thousand times lower still." (St. Bernard, 12th Century)

"Since the debt incurred by the sin of Adam cannot be met by Adam's insolvent progeny - and since Christ's blood pays the ransom - his Circumcision becomes, as it were, a first installment, a down payment on behalf of mankind. It is because Christ was circumcised that the Christian no longer needs of circumcision. In the words of St. Ambrose: 'Since the price has been paid for all after Christ ... suffered, there is no longer need for the blood of each individual to be shed by circumcision.'"

As adults, of course, we undergo many sacrifices and sufferings in our lives, but no baby has any understanding of such things. Most people would seriously question the ethics of subjecting a baby to any kind of trauma or loss of body part just because that was the fate of Jesus or any other admired leader.

What does modern medical circumcision have to do with the Bible?

Nothing. The medical practice of infant circumcision came about in the late 1800's, for a number of spurious, superstitious reasons. Some people believed that it would prevent masturbation, or a number of other possible diseases. All of these suppositions have long been proven invalid.

While the medical profession provides a needed function in society, and most medical practitioners are hard-working individuals deserving much respect, the medical profession in many people's eyes has become a type of idolatry. We treat hospitals like "sacred temples" and have turned doctors into false "gods."

Just as many people believe that birth *has* to take place in a hospital, we have come to believe that the newborn infant must go through a number of rituals and ablutions to be "official" and survive in society. Weighing, measuring, putting ointment in the

eyes, washing the baby, putting on identification bands, putting him in a special warming crib, bundling him in blankets, and keeping him in the hospital nursery are all hospital rituals imposed upon the newborn. How different are we from the primitive who believes that his illness will be cured from his Shaman shaking rattles and dancing? In this respect, infant circumcision in hospitals has become a "ritual" of its own accord -- a product of our tendency to regard all medical practices as "sacred."

The Christian is especially admonished not to make *anything* into a false religion - not even things that are necessary or beneficial in and of themselves. We are to worship *only* the Lord our God. To give the medical profession, or anything else, any kind of undue worship is going against basic Christian beliefs.

Do babies have rights?

Concern over abortion and concern over routine infant circumcision are equally volatile issues which in most cases should be kept separate. Yet they have many parallels. Some people see *both* as acts of medical violence and invalidation of our precious, innocent infants.

Most Christians either oppose abortion, or at least have serious moral concerns about it, and do agree that human life is real and deserving of respect and consideration from the beginning of pregnancy on.

Those who oppose routine infant circumcision are deeply concerned with the infant's rights as a human being. No baby or small child has ever wanted or asked to be circumcised. Taking away a baby's foreskin (or any other normal body part) is altering/mutilating his body *without his permission*, as well as subjecting him to severe and unnecessary pain.

Anyone who supports the rights of the *pre-born* child, certainly should be challenged similarly to consider the rights of the *already* born child.

How are Christians supposed to treat other people?

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law." Galatians 5:22-23

"So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." Matthew 7:12

The intact baby movement is borne out of a deep sense of compassion and sensitivity to the needs of helpless infants. A tiny newborn, barely out of his mother's womb, totally dependent upon adults and trusting them to attend to all his needs, is one minute sleeping peacefully in his crib or in his mother's arms, and the next minute is undressed, taken away from those who love him, placed upon his back, spread-eagled, with his arms and legs strapped down into an immobile plastic board. First a hemostat is used to tightly crimp a small length along his foreskin. then a dorsal slit is made and the foreskin is torn away from the glans. The most common modern methods employ a "bell" device which fits beneath the foreskin and over the glans. By one method a metal clamp is tightly screwed down over the outside of the foreskin, left in place for about five minutes, and the foreskin is then sliced away and the clamp and bell removed. By another method a string is tied around the plastic bell, part of the foreskin trimmed away, the handle of the bell broken off, while the remaining plastic ring and small piece of foreskin is left in place until the skin dries up and the ring falls off about a week later.

Usually no anesthesia is used for this procedures. Most babies scream in anguish as this is done. Some vomit, urinate, or pass their bowels in response to the trauma. Many arch their backs and struggle futilely to free themselves. Some babies shrink within themselves and cannot cry in response to the pain, but instead pass out into an unconscious state. Although platitudes that "babies feel no pain" have abounded for centuries, anyone with any level of sensitivity towards infants can only feel heartbroken that a helpless, exquisitely sensitive infant should ever be made to endure such an ordeal

Activists in the intact baby movement wish to put an end to this. We are filled with a deep, heartfelt compassion for the most helpless, voiceless of our fellow human beings - our own precious infants. We love babies too much to accept that this much cruelty should be allowed to happen to them. We uphold that infants should be treated with great gentleness and kindness and that the beginnings of their lives should be filled with joy and peace. Aren't these also Christian ideals?

Where does infant circumcision belong in the light of the "fruits of the Spirit?" A tiny infant, strapped to a board, knife to his genitals, certainly isn't feeling joy nor love. It is about the most *un*-peaceful scene imaginable. There is no kindness nor goodness manifested in cutting and hurting a child's genitals. Circumcision is about the most *un*-gentle action anyone could do to a baby. And where is our faithfulness in the correct design of the body, much less our faith in the belief that our sins are paid for in the blood of Christ alone, by saying no to what has become an idolatrous medical

ritual? Where is our self-control in not mutilating our child? Our patience in allowing the child to be himself?

What kind of example should Christians be presenting to the rest of the world?

Too often in the eyes of the rest of society, many non-Christians appear to be much more loving, compassionate, gentle, and concerned about the welfare of children (or about a number of other social concerns) than do most Christians. The non-believer often sees hypocrisy and feels repulsion at the idea of identifying with such people when Christians present themselves as unloving, uncompassionate, uncaring, narrow-minded, cruel, and unyielding. Christians must always remember that when we present ourselves to the world by our actions and attitudes, we are showing them Jesus, and of course, Jesus never hurt a child in any way.

Of additional concern is that of inner personal strength and self-acceptance. Some parents have their sons circumcised because "everyone else does" - although this argument is considerably less strong today as increasing numbers of parents *are* leaving their sons intact. Some parents have intentionally chosen to leave their sons intact specifically because they firmly believe in "not following the herd" and wish to teach their children the value of not succumbing to mindless conformity. In an age of dangerous fads and peer pressure and rampant drug abuse, this can be an essential survival skill.

Many of us who voice concern over routine infant circumcision have been wishing for an organized voice from the Christian world speaking out against genital mutilation. Christian apathy to this issue can only be considered a public embarrassment. If our Christian ideals of love, gentleness, peace, and following the Golden Rule cannot begin with our own children, how relevant can they be to the rest of the world?

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Rosemary Romberg, author of *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma*, c. 1985, Bergin & Garvey, S. Hadley, MA.

(Some passages in the above article have been taken directly from the text of *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma*.)

E-mail: rosemary@gci.net [back to text](#)

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/male-circumcision-what-would-jesus-do>

HALO

Male Circumcision: What Would Jesus Do?

On the eighth day of his life, before the Wise Men visited, Jesus was circumcised. What would he make of the debate raging today over male circumcision?

12.27.15 1:15 AM ET

When we think of the birth of Jesus, we think of the traditional images of Christmas: the shepherds, the angels, the farm animals jostling to see the Christ child, the swift removal of his foreskin a week later.

No? Scratch that last part?

It's true that the Christmas story is more babe in a manger than bris in the synagogue, but as a Jewish male infant Jesus was circumcised and, chronologically speaking, on the eighth day—and thus before the appearance of any wise men from the east. And yet somehow with all the food, presents, and Santa-fetishizing, the circumcision of Jesus doesn't get a look in. But as debate about the ethics of circumcising children rages on, perhaps it really should.

The only biblical evidence for Jesus's circumcision comes from the infancy narrative found in the Gospel of Luke. On the eighth day, we are told, he was circumcised and officially given the name Jesus (although Gabriel had called it at the Annunciation).

There are much later extra-biblical Christian texts, like the 4th-century Syriac text *The Cave of Treasures* and the monastic writer Epiphanius, who refer to the event. And, as a

supporting witness to the cult of relics that boomed in late antique Christianity, the 6th-century *Arabic Infancy Gospel of Our Savior* claims that a “Hebrew woman” preserved Jesus’s foreskin in an alabaster jar of nard. It’s a story that lays the groundwork for the claims made by certain medieval churches that they possess the holy prepuce (foreskin).

The circumcision of Jesus as described in Luke is performed in accordance with Jewish law, as a fulfillment of the covenant made between Abraham and God. According to Matthew Thiessen, an assistant professor of New Testament at Saint Louis University and the author of two books on circumcision in early Judaism and the New Testament, the purpose of the story is to demonstrate the enormous piety of Jesus’s family.

It’s an interesting detail not only because Christians today are no longer circumcised for religious reasons. It was also a contentious issue for the first followers of Jesus. Thiessen told me that the question of whether or not non-Jewish followers of Jesus should undergo circumcision “was the hot-button topic” among Jesus’s apostles. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, converts believed—how could they gain access to the salvation offered in him unless they became real Jews and were circumcised? The position outlined in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, that gentile converts should not be circumcised, eventually won the day. But the sharpness of Paul’s language (he calls Peter a hypocrite and the Galatians foolish) shows us just how heated the debate was in its own time.

The debate over circumcision is still heated today, albeit in a somewhat different form. Male circumcision is widely practiced in the U.S. for both religious and non-religious (ethical, health) reasons. In the late 19th century, when circumcision was promoted alongside advances in antiseptics and anesthesia, it was seen as a preemptive cure for masturbation. John Harvey Kellogg, a chief proponent of this theory, advocated in [*Plain Facts for Young and Old*](#) (1881) that circumcision should be performed without anesthesia as the pain would have a “salutary effect on the mind.” The argument was that

the pain associated with circumcision would further dissuade the boy from touching his genitalia.

Modern proponents of secular infant circumcision have long since abandoned the ethical argument. Instead they argue that the removal of the foreskin helps safeguard against the spread of STDs and reduces the risks of UTIs, prostate cancer, and accidental injury. The World Health Organization, for example, [recommends](#) male circumcision as a means of reducing the rate of HIV infection. Majority practice in Western culture even seeps into our aesthetics. In pop culture uncircumcised penises get something of a bad rap, being [described](#) as unattractive and undesirable. The confluence of medicine and popular opinion serve to perpetuate the norm.

On the other hand, a growing number sees male circumcision as nothing short of genital mutilation. It is, after all, an unnecessary surgery performed on an individual incapable of providing consent. As such one could argue that it violates the most basic assumptions of medical ethics. It may even have negative consequences. A study by Sorrells, Snyder, and Reiss, [published](#) in a 2007 issue of the *British Journal of Urology*, concluded that circumcised males experienced reduced sensitivity during sex. Although subsequent studies have contested these findings, some argue that if male circumcision hinders sexual enjoyment it is analogous to female genital mutilation. Groups like [Doctors Opposing Circumcision](#) continue to advocate for genital integrity and circumcision is on the [decline](#).

New Testament texts are only occasionally invoked in this debate. But what would happen if they were? When I asked Thiessen if he thinks that either Paul or Jesus would have considered circumcision to be a form of mutilation, he said no. Some ancient rabbinic thinking, he added, saw circumcision on the eighth day to be especially humane. God delayed circumcision until then, we are told, out of “compassion,” so that the infant could grow in strength (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 6:1). There are, however passages in the

New Testament that could speak to the anti-circumcision cause. In Philippians 3:2, Paul labels those who insist on circumcision for non-Jewish converts as “those who mutilate the flesh.” There is, at the end of the day, no religious reason for Christians to circumcise their sons.

Ultimately, the point of the Gospel circumcision story is to emphasize the Jewish identity of Jesus, something that is lost in our celebrations. “Modern Christian depictions of Jesus’s nativity, from Christmas pageants to Christmas hymns, almost always minimize or even erase Jesus’s Jewishness, when the details of the [infancy narratives] ought to serve as a reminder to emphasize this fundamental feature of Jesus’s identity.” Putting the Christ back in Christmas should involve recognizing that Jesus was—from birth to death—a pious Jew.

<https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/circumcision-what-does-science-say/>

Circumcision: What Does Science Say?

There are no compelling scientific arguments for or against neonatal circumcision. Benefits and risks are, scientifically speaking, small.

However, the nonscientific arguments for and against circumcision are loud, and often irrational.

Harriet Hall on November 4, 2008

Some people think circumcision is mutilation; others want one even if they don’t know what it is. When I was working in an Air Force hospital emergency room one night, a young airman came in requesting a circumcision. I asked him why he wanted one. He said a couple of his friends had had it done, and he’d heard it was a good idea, and he was going to be getting out of the Air Force pretty soon and wanted to have it done while Uncle Sam would still foot the bill. I examined him: he had a neatly circumcised penis without so much as a hint of any foreskin remnant. I’ve always wondered what he thought we were going to cut off.

The subject of circumcision evokes strong emotions. Some people think of neonatal circumcision as a religious duty or a valuable preventive health

measure; others think it is the epitome of child abuse. I have no strong feelings either way. I'm not sure what I would have decided if I'd had sons; fortunately my children were both daughters so I didn't have to decide. I'm going to try to stand back and look at the scientific evidence objectively. What are the medical benefits and risks of circumcision?

There is a [website](#) that is admittedly biased in favor of circumcision but that has collected an impressive amount of information in one place, with 660 references. I learned way too much from that website. For instance that the circumcised penis averages 0.8 cm shorter than the uncircumcised penis (possibly due to improper technique occasionally removing too much tissue and "tethering" the organ slightly). And that an intact foreskin is an absolute requirement for a mutual masturbation practice amongst homosexual men known as "docking," in which the penis is placed under the foreskin of the male partner. I didn't need to know that. You probably didn't want to know that either, but now it's too late.

In addition to pro-circumcision groups like Circinfo.net, there are numerous anti-circumcision activist groups. There are even groups that encourage re-creation of the lost foreskin by stretching the penile skin with specially-designed weights. Penn and Teller featured this on an episode of their cable TV series Bullshit! An elderly man exposed his genitals – weights and all – on national television to promote his cause. It was pretty amazing. A somewhat blurred [version can be seen on U-Tube](#).

Arguments against circumcision

- "Nature makes no mistakes."
- It's genital mutilation and a violation of human rights.
- Doctors just do it to earn more money.
- It's cruel; babies suffer terrible pain.
- Babies remember the pain.
- There are permanent physiologic consequences: boys who were circumcised at birth are more sensitive to pain later in life.
- The uncovered glans becomes less sensitive.

- Circumcised men don't get as much pleasure from sex.
- Circumcised men are psychologically damaged.
- Some men mourn their lost foreskin; some miss it so much that they try to reconstruct it.
- The foreskin is required for the homosexual practice of "docking."
- An intact foreskin provides more scope for body art like piercings and tattoos.
- There are complications from the surgery including hemorrhage, infection and even death (in one famous case a boy's penis was accidentally burned off by an electrocautery device and they elected to raise him as a girl).
- Other complications include poor cosmetic results and meatal stenosis.
- If reconstructive surgery is needed later in life, an intact foreskin can provide tissue.
- It's elective surgery and the patient doesn't get a choice in the matter.

Some of these arguments are medical; some are not. Some are questionable. The "doctors want to make money" argument doesn't seem to hold water, since plenty of circumcisions are done in settings where doctors are on a fixed salary and circumcisions just mean more work.

There's no good evidence that circumcised men get less pleasure from sex. Studies have shown little or no difference in sensitivity or sexual satisfaction with circumcision. If there were lowered sensitivity it might theoretically enhance pleasure by allowing more prolonged intercourse; and one man commented, "most [circumcised] men will tell you that if their genitalia were any more sensitive, it would cry during Meryl Streep movies."

If some men are psychologically damaged by circumcision and mourn their lost foreskin, their mental health must be pathologically fragile. Get over it, guys!

I don't think there is any evidence that babies are capable of remembering the pain of circumcision or for that matter the birth experience. There have been studies suggesting that infant circumcision alters pain response later in life, but they are contradictory and unconvincing.

The risks are minimal if the procedure is done under sterile conditions by an experienced operator. Many of the serious complications documented in the literature were easily preventable. "Overall complications should approach zero for an experienced operator" especially if the safer techniques are used and contraindications like hemophilia and penile abnormalities are heeded.

A colleague told me he challenges his students to find any difference in babies who just had the procedure, and they can't. Babies seem to get just as upset from lesser procedures like having blood drawn, and sometimes an irritable baby goes into a hissy fit just from being dressed or from being hungry. They cry uncontrollably for even trivial reasons, but they get over it promptly.

I used to do assembly-line circumcisions where we'd strap several babies to molded plastic restraining boards; they didn't like being restrained, but by the time the last baby was restrained, the first one would usually have stopped crying and would often remain calm throughout the actual procedure, especially if he'd been given a sugar pacifier. Sometimes he'd even go to sleep. I used a Plastibell device: the actual cutting part of the procedure is painless even without anesthesia, because the tissue is already "dead" – the blood supply has been cut off by tying a string over the groove in the plastic ring. Studies have documented physiologic changes during the procedure, but it's not clear that those changes mean anything that really matters to the child's mental state or physical welfare. It's current practice to inject an anesthetic, but that carries its own small risk and also causes pain: it's not 100% clear whether we're using it for the infant's benefit or the adults'. Some doctors still wonder if it might be kinder to skip the anesthesia and just get the procedure over with and the baby back in Mom's arms as quickly as possible.

Arguments for circumcision

Some of the arguments for circumcision are unavoidably intertwined with a separate issue: hygiene. The warm, moist space under the foreskin is a prime breeding ground for bacteria, it can harbor sexually transmitted disease organisms, and it produces a cheese-like, foul-smelling substance called

smegma. It is plausible that this could contribute to infections in the man and his partner, and even to cancer. Many studies support that idea, others don't. There doesn't seem to be any good evidence comparing circumcised men to uncircumcised men who practice meticulous hygiene. It's difficult to sort out whether it is the circumcision itself or just improved hygiene that makes the difference. Circumcision undoubtedly facilitates hygiene, but is that a reason to operate?

- **Circumcision reduces the transmission of AIDS.** Maybe. A [2008 meta-analysis](#) of studies in Africa indicated that one case of heterosexually transmitted AIDS would be prevented by 72 circumcisions. It seems to be less effective at preventing male-to-male homosexual transmission. This gets confusing, because knowing they have had a risk-reducing procedure might increase promiscuity, and improved hygiene alone might reduce risk. Anyway, circumcision doesn't remove the risk entirely, and safe sex is still necessary. Since there are other more effective ways to prevent AIDS transmission, few would argue for circumcision just for the purpose of AIDS prevention.
- **Circumcision prevents penile cancer.** The incidence of penile cancer is about 1 in 100,000 in the US. By one estimate, the lifetime risk for an uncircumcised man in the US is 1 in 600. The 5 year survival rate is about 65%. Penile cancer is almost never seen in circumcised men; such a case is unusual enough to be written up as a case report in a medical journal. In third world countries where hygiene is poorer and circumcision is less common, penile cancer causes up to 10% or 20% of cancers in men. Disgusting photos can be seen at http://www.circinfo.net/cancer_of_the_penis.html. The [American Cancer Society thinks the studies showing reduced penile cancer rates were flawed](#) because they failed to consider other factors that are now known to affect risk, such as smoking, personal hygiene, HPV infection, and multiple sexual partners. It concluded:
The current consensus of most experts is that circumcision should not be recommended as a prevention strategy for penile cancer.
- **Reduced risk of urinary tract infection.** Several studies have shown that circumcised baby boys have fewer UTIs but the reduction is small and [this study](#) suggests confounding factors might be responsible.

- **Reduced risk of balanitis** (inflammation of the glans penis). Most studies show balanitis is more common in uncircumcised males, but at least one study indicated that it was more common in circumcised males, especially in early childhood.
- **Reduction of the incidence of various sexually transmitted diseases** in men and in their female partners. Reduction of cervical cancer and maybe even breast cancer in women. Again, these are likely more related to hygiene than to surgery.
- **Circumcision prevents phimosis** (the inability to retract the foreskin) **and paraphimosis** (a painful inability to pull the retracted foreskin back down). Paraphimosis can obstruct urine and blood flow and is a medical emergency.
- **About 10% of uncircumcised infants will require circumcision later in life** for medical reasons. Adult circumcision is more expensive, more difficult, riskier, requires stitches, and causes more suffering than neonatal circumcision. The conditions that lead to the medical necessity for circumcision also cause suffering that would have been avoided by neonatal circumcision.
- **Hygiene.** It's easier to keep a circumcised penis clean. Certainly it's a convenience, but that doesn't constitute a medical indication.
- **Aesthetics.** Women allegedly prefer the appearance of a circumcised penis. Even if true, not a medical indication.
- **Zipper injuries** to the foreskin can't occur if you don't have a foreskin. True, but trivial.
- **Other boys will laugh at you** in the locker room if you're uncircumcised. (I don't think this one even deserves a comment.)

Not medically indicated or contraindicated

What all this really boils down to is that there are no compelling scientific arguments for or against neonatal circumcision.

There are small risks and there are small benefits. The decision is not a medical one. Medical organizations are not "pro" circumcision, but they're not "con" either. The [American Academy of Pediatrics' official policy](#) states:

Existing scientific evidence demonstrates potential medical benefits of newborn male circumcision; however, these data are not sufficient to recommend routine neonatal circumcision. In circumstances in which

there are potential benefits and risks, yet the procedure is not essential to the child's current well-being, parents should determine what is in the best interest of the child.

Aside from religious reasons, the main reason parents give for circumcision seems to be simply to make junior match Dad. Even if you believe potential medical benefits outweigh the risks, does that justify doing an elective procedure to remove a piece of the child's skin without his consent? That's a value judgment and an ethical dilemma that will continue to evoke strong emotions, like abortion.

I used to live in Spain, where you could tell girl babies from boy babies just by looking at their ears: all the baby girls had their ears pierced in the delivery room. That was a "mutilating" procedure with no conceivable medical benefit and a small risk of infection, deformity, or ingestion of earring parts. It was nowhere near as controversial as circumcision. I wonder why.

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Posted by Harriet Hall

Harriet Hall, MD also known as The SkepDoc, is a retired family physician who writes about pseudoscience and questionable medical practices. She received her BA and MD from the University of Washington, did her internship in the Air Force (the second female ever to do so), and was the first female graduate of the Air Force family practice residency at Eglin Air Force Base. During a long career as an Air Force physician, she held various positions from flight surgeon to DBMS (Director of Base Medical Services) and did everything from delivering babies to taking the controls of a B-52. She retired with the rank of Colonel. In 2008 she published her memoirs, [*Women Aren't Supposed to Fly*](#).