

Whether you're expecting a baby boy or have just welcomed your new little guy into the world, you have an important decision to make before you take your son home: whether to circumcise him.

For some families, the choice is simple because it's based on cultural or religious beliefs. But for others, the right option isn't as clear-cut. Before you make a circumcision decision, it's important to talk to [your child's doctor](#) and consider some of the issues.

What Is Circumcision?

Boys are born with a hood of skin, called the foreskin, covering the head (also called the glans) of the penis. In circumcision, the foreskin is surgically removed, exposing the end of the penis.

Approximately 56% of all newborn boys - about 1.1 million babies - are circumcised in the United States each year. The procedure is much more widespread in the United States, Canada, and the Middle East than in Asia, South America, Central America, and most of Europe, where it's uncommon.

Parents who choose circumcision often do so based on religious beliefs, concerns about hygiene, or cultural or social reasons, such as the wish to have their son look like other men in the family.

If you do opt for circumcision, it's best to perform the operation within the first 2 to 3 weeks after birth, as it can become more complicated as a child gets older. But the procedure is usually performed during the first 10 days (often within the first 48 hours), either in the hospital or, for some religious ritual circumcisions, at home. If you decide to have your son circumcised at the hospital, your pediatrician, family doctor, or obstetrician will perform the procedure before you bring your baby home. The doctor should prepare you by telling you about the procedure he or she will use and the possible risks.

In some instances, doctors may decide to delay the procedure or forgo it altogether. [Premature](#) babies or those who have special medical concerns may not be circumcised until they're ready to leave the hospital. And babies born with physical abnormalities of the penis that need to be corrected surgically often aren't circumcised at all because the foreskin may eventually be used as part of a reconstructive operation.

The Pros and Cons

On the plus side, studies indicate that circumcised infants are less likely to contract a [urinary tract infection](#) (UTI) in the first year of life. About one out of every 1,000 circumcised boys has a UTI in the first year, whereas the rate is one in 100 (at most) for uncircumcised infants.

Circumcised men may also be at lower risk for penile cancer, although the disease is rare in both circumcised and uncircumcised males. Although some studies indicate that the procedure might offer an additional line of defense against [sexually transmitted diseases](#) (STDs), particularly [HIV](#), the results of studies in this area are conflicting and difficult to interpret.

It's also easier to keep a circumcised penis clean, although uncircumcised boys can learn how to clean beneath the foreskin once the foreskin becomes retractable (usually some time before age 5). However, some uncircumcised boys can end up with infected foreskins as the result of poor hygiene.

Some people also claim that circumcision either lessens or heightens the sensitivity of the tip of the penis, decreasing or increasing sexual pleasure later in life. But neither of these subjective findings has been proven to be true.

Although circumcision appears to have some medical benefits, it also carries potential risks - as does any surgical procedure. These risks are small, but you should be aware of both the possible advantages and the problems that can be associated with the procedure before you make your decision. Complications of newborn circumcision are uncommon, occurring in between 0.2% to 3% of cases. Of these, the most frequent are minor bleeding and local infection, both of which can be easily treated by your child's doctor.

Perhaps one of the hardest parts of the decision to circumcise is accepting that the procedure can be painful. In the past, it wasn't commonplace to provide pain relief for babies being circumcised, but because studies have indicated that it benefits the infant to receive anesthesia, most doctors will now provide it. Also, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends the use of pain relief measures for circumcision. Even up until recently, though, anesthesia hasn't been universally used, so it's important to ask your doctor ahead of time what, if any, pain relief will be utilized with your son.

Two primary forms of local anesthetic are used to make the operation less painful for your baby:

- a topical cream (a cream put on the penis) that requires at least 20 to 40 minutes to take its full effect
- an injectable anesthetic that requires less time to take effect and may provide a slightly longer period of anesthesia

Besides anesthesia, giving a pacifier dipped in sugar water can help reduce your baby's level of stress (and yours). Used together, these methods can decrease your baby's discomfort by more than 50%.

Caring for a Circumcised Penis

Whether you choose circumcision or not, it's important to keep your son's penis clean. It should be washed with soap and warm water every time you bathe him. And you don't need to use cotton swabs, astringents, or any special bath products.

There are also no special washing precautions with newly circumcised babies, other than to be gentle, as your baby may have some mild discomfort after the circumcision. If your son has a bandage on his incision, you might need to apply a new one whenever you change his diaper for a day or 2 after the procedure (put petroleum jelly on the bandage so it won't stick to his skin). Doctors often also recommend putting a dab of petroleum jelly on the baby's penis or on the front of the diaper to alleviate any potential discomfort caused by friction against the diaper.

How you take care of your baby's penis may also vary depending on the type of circumcision procedure your child's doctor performs. Be sure to talk to him or her about what aftercare will be needed.

It usually takes between 7 to 10 days for a penis to heal. Until it does, the tip may seem raw or yellowish in color. Although this is normal, certain other symptoms are not. Call your child's doctor right away if you notice any of the following:

- persistent [bleeding](#)
- redness around the tip of the penis that gets worse after 3 days
- [fever](#)
- signs of infection, such as the presence of pus-filled blisters
- not urinating normally within 6 to 8 hours after the circumcision

However, with quick intervention, almost all circumcision-related problems are easily treated.

Caring for an Uncircumcised Penis

As with a penis that's circumcised, an uncircumcised one should be kept clean. Also, no cotton swabs, astringents, or any special bath products are needed - simple soap and warm water every time you bathe your baby will suffice.

However, you should never forcibly pull back the foreskin to clean beneath it. Instead, gently tense it against the tip of the penis and wash off any smegma (the whitish "beads" of dead skin cells mixed with the body's natural oil). Over time, the foreskin will retract on its own so that it can be pulled away from the glans toward the abdomen. This happens at different times for different children, but most boys can retract their foreskins by the time they're 5 years old.

As your son grows up, teach him to wash beneath the foreskin by gently pulling it back from the glans, rinsing the glans and the inside of the foreskin with soap and warm water, then pulling the foreskin back over the head of the penis.

Making a Circumcision Decision

In addition to the medical issues discussed, religious and cultural beliefs often figure into the equation. Of course, if these are important to you, they deserve to be seriously considered.

Despite the possible benefits and risks, circumcision is neither essential nor detrimental to a boy's health. The AAP and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) do **not** endorse the procedure as a way to prevent any of the medical conditions mentioned previously. The AAP also does **not** find sufficient evidence to medically recommend circumcision **or** argue against it.

Talk to your child's doctor about the pros and cons of circumcision to help you make the choice that's right for your son.

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Date reviewed: January 2005

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