

Now it may happen that his father doesn't have a foreskin, but don't worry, your son's foreskin is not some python that's going to rise up and strangle him. About 70% of the males in the world (about 2.1 billion men and boys) have them, and they're very trouble-free. Many men say they greatly enjoy having one, and would not willingly part with it. There are several good reasons for this.

First, let's look at what his foreskin is. You've probably heard it called just "a flap of skin covering the end of his penis". Well,

- It is the end of his penis, integral, not an optional extra
- It's not a flap, but a double-walled tube that will have a unique rolling action when he's older.
- It's not just skin, but also nerves, sensitive nerve-endings, a thin layer of muscle, and on its inner side, the same kind of surface as the lining of your mouth
- And it's remarkably big - especially when he's grown up, but even as a baby. Unfolded, an average man's foreskin is as big as a 3"x5" file-card.

### *So what does his foreskin do?*

Some people say "Mankind used to need it when we ran around naked, but no more." Well, it still protects the surface of the head (glans) of his penis and keeps it soft. Clothing doesn't do that - on the contrary, clothing hardens it, the way walking barefoot hardens your feet.

While he's a baby, it also protects his urine-tube (urethra) from bacteria entering, like a kind of flap valve; that's why a baby's is so long. Babies who don't have a foreskin are more likely to get ulcers around the opening in the head where the urine comes out, which causes it to close. Then they have to have surgery to fix that.

There is some suggestion that the cells of the inside of his foreskin are part of his immune system.

All those nerves, some 20,000 of them, will probably have a sexual function: they're in the right place and they're of the right kind. What's the most sensitive part of his father's penis? (If he doesn't have a foreskin.) The underside, just behind the head (the frenulum), right? Well, there is a ring of tissue, just as sensitive as that, running right around inside your son's foreskin. Sadly, for men without foreskins, the frenulum is all that is left of that.

Now here's a question for you: *Whose foreskin is it, anyway?*

### *Why, his of course! Why do you ask?*

Because now it's time to talk about the "c" word:

## Circumcision

- cutting off his foreskin. Not only that, but when he is born, the inside of his foreskin is closely attached to the head of his penis. Before it can be cut off, the doctor has to run a blunt probe around between his foreskin and his glans to separate them. That hurts like hell, and leaves the surface of his glans bloody and raw. The raw edge of his cut foreskin may then heal back on to the raw surface of his glans, forming a "skin bridge". Skin bridges are not at all uncommon, and they can form little tunnels where it's very hard to clean - defeating one of the purposes of circumcision.

A surprising number of men have other damage, scars across the head, stray tags of skin hanging off their penis, or ugly lumps.

The pain of circumcision is now known to be excruciating, and can only partly be deadened with drugs. (Healing takes at least a week, and urine is acid, like lemon juice in the cut.) Better not to give babies drugs anyway. The shock of circumcision makes breastfeeding harder to establish.

Worse things can go wrong with circumcision. You may have heard of the man in Winnipeg, Canada who was raised as a girl after his penis was accidentally burnt off, or the boy in Washington state who's brain-damaged. Babies sometimes die from circumcision - very rarely, but that's small consolation to their parents.

### *So why does anyone do it?*

Good question. Cutting off part of the genitals goes back to the dawn of time. It seems to have arisen as some kind of magical attempt at taking control over sex. Maybe it was to make the penis look like an erect one, giving magical potency. Or maybe the shedding of the baby's blood was a sacrifice. In various parts of the world it's still a tribal rite. Once started, circumcision seems to be a habit that's hard to break.

- Its modern secular practice began in the 19th century, to "cure" masturbation. (It didn't work, of course.)
- When that lost credibility, circumcision attached itself to sexually transmitted diseases. (Studies show any difference is marginal at best. One found only circumcised men had the commonest STD, chlamydia.)

- Then Dr Abraham Wolbarst thought he had shown that circumcision protected men against penile cancer. (All he really found was that older men, born before circumcision was fashionable, are more likely to contract penile cancer. Penile cancer rates are much lower in some countries that do not circumcise {such as Denmark}, than in the US.)
- During the Second World War, men were circumcised when they caught VD (maybe as punishment) but they told their families their foreskins had got infected, and many babies were circumcised to prevent that.
- About this time, Dr Benjamin Spock recommended it, which really set the bandwagon rolling. (He later changed his mind.)
- Then came cervical cancer in the men's partners. (These studies compared populations with many other cultural differences as well as circumcision.)
- Urinary Tract Infection. (Girls are more likely to get UTIs than any boys, and they of course are treated with medicine, not surgery. Boys born prematurely are more susceptible to UTI and are more often left intact. Some studies failed to correct for this.)
- And now almost inevitably, HIV/AIDS. The African trials are not as conclusive as their proponents claim. The AIDS rate in non-circumcising Europe and Scandinavia is much lower than in the US. It would be ineffective to use circumcision to prevent the spread of HIV in the developed world, and very foolish for anyone to rely on his circumcision to protect him against HIV.

So we should beware of each new claim that circumcision protects against the disease of the day.

Circumcision used to be as fashionable in the rest of the English-speaking world as it is in the US, but it's virtually obsolete there now - and there have been no epidemics of foreskin-related diseases since it stopped.

### *But isn't it cleaner?*

There's much less to clean with a boy than a girl. He just needs the outside washed until he can pull it back easily by himself (probably not till he's about three) and then wash the inside as well. (The very small amount of stuff inside is called "smegma", Greek for soap - it washes out easily.) The best person to decide when he's ready to do that is him. It's very important not to force his foreskin back before it's ready. That can cause tearing and damage (which can almost always be fixed without circumcision, though).

*It's very important to our family / congregation / community that he be circumcised.*

Again, **whose penis is it?** You'd fight to the death if some stranger tried to grab your baby and cut off part of his or her genitals. What difference does it make **to him** if now it's people close to you?

Circumcision is a human rights issue. Where it's a religious practice, there are movements within those communities to leave out the surgery. The great religions of the world promote kindness, compassion and the integrity of the individual. Why should the treatment of a baby's genitals be different?

Cutting a girl's genitals for any reason except medical need is outlawed in the US and many Western countries. That includes even token cutting and pricking, far milder than male circumcision. Why should baby boys go unprotected?

*Won't he worry about looking different?*

Circumcision is now nowhere near universal anywhere in the US. He'll certainly find others like him, and they may even be in the majority: it could be the circumcised boys who'll feel different, and they won't have the consolation that he will, that he's got more than them. If his brothers are circumcised, it need not be a big issue between them: just tell them, "They used to tell us it was a good thing to do, now they don't think so."

*Well, circumcision never harmed me!*

Perhaps it didn't, perhaps you were just lucky. A baby's penis is tiny, and how much is removed (and exactly what) is very much a matter of chance. Your son might not be as lucky as you.

*But shouldn't a boy look like his father?*

When the boy sees his father's penis, what he'll notice most is its hairiness and size. When he notices the other difference, his dad can explain in simple language what happened to him. Your son will almost certainly say, "Boy, I'm sure glad you didn't let them do that to me."

*It takes a brave man  
to admit that his sexuality  
might not be  
all that it could be.*

*It takes a strong man  
to grant his son something  
that was taken from him.*

**Congratulations on  
your baby!**

**He's wonderful.**

**All of him.**

**Congratulations!**



**It's a BOY!**

**And that means...**

**He's got a penis!**

**Which means...**

**He has a foreskin...**