

# The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia

## Circumcision

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The circumcision of male infants is one of the most common surgical procedures performed in the world, and is the most common surgery performed in the United States. While adolescent and adult males sometimes undergo circumcision, the procedure is most commonly performed on newborns, typically within a few days, weeks, or months following birth. The procedure involves removal of up to 50 percent of the foreskin (or prepuce) of the penis, thereby fully exposing the glans. In some instances, the frenulum (a ridge of skin that connects the prepuce to the glans) is also cut, and in some cases, an incision may be made on the glans. Male circumcision has a long history, and is one of the oldest recorded surgical procedures in the world. It is carried out for a variety of religious, social, and medical purposes. Yet, the procedure has been and continues to be widely contested, particularly as scientific evidence about the health benefits associated with circumcision are debated. Current objections to the routine circumcision of newborns are raised by those who believe that the practice is a fundamental violation of the individual rights to bodily integrity.

Historically, circumcision has served a religious function, and has also been used to promote a variety of social and medical aims. In Judaism, circumcision symbolized a covenant with God, and is believed to go back as far as Abraham. The procedure is typically carried out on the eighth day following birth, and is generally performed by a trained individual known as a *mohe*. Within Islam, the ritual of circumcision is known as *kitan* or *khatna*, which symbolizes cleanliness, used to be carried out as a rite of puberty when a boy was between 7 and 10 years old, but now it is more commonly performed in a hospital following a boy's birth. In ancient times, circumcision was frequently used in a context of social control and warfare. For example, it was used to physically mark slaves. It was also used as a means to celebrate military conquests, as victors would remove the foreskin of members of the opposing force and collect them in a bag, displaying them as war trophies.

During the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, circumcision has been promoted as a “cure-all” of sorts, a way to treat or prevent a variety of illnesses and conditions. For example, in earlier decades, circumcision was touted as a means to prevent masturbation and the “perverse” mentality that was attributed to men and boys who were caught engaging in the practice. During the early and into the mid-20th century, circumcision was also promoted as a means to cure or treat paralysis, hip disease, nervous conditions,

and antisocial behavior, and prevent penile cancer, skin conditions such as eczema, tuberculosis, and imbecility. It was also endorsed by some physicians to address certain sexual problems including as a means of curing impotence, and to cure lewd and voracious sexual appetites.

## Recent Practices and Perceptions

In more recent years, there has been increased attention given to circumcision and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Beginning in the mid-1990s, studies in various African countries indicated that circumcised males had lower rates of STDs and STIs than uncircumcised males. Consequently, some health care providers and politicians began to advocate for routine male circumcision as a means to stem HIV infection rates. Yet, more recent data suggests, that there may be no statistically significant difference in rates of STD and STI infection between circumcised and uncircumcised males, particularly when the studies are controlled for other factors, such as age [p. 240 ↓ ] race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and sexual practices.

Thus, while medical associations such as the American Association of Pediatrics and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology suggest that there may be some health benefits associated with circumcision, such as reduced rates of infection and penile cancer, they have stopped short of endorsing routine circumcision of male infants as a prophylactic measure.

Since the 1970s, there has been a gradual decline in rates of routine infant circumcision in the United States. Whereas approximately 80 percent of male infants born in the 1970s and 1980s were circumcised, at present, only about half of newborn males in the country undergo the procedure. In some states, circumcision rates are only around 40 percent. Rates of circumcision remain higher among those of white European descent than among African Americans or Latinos. Many parents choose to circumcise their sons for social reasons, including because other male family members are circumcised, because they wish to protect their sons from the ridicule they presume their sons will face if they are not circumcised, or because they deem a circumcised penis more aesthetically pleasing.

Yet, there are growing concerns about the side effects and complications associated with routine circumcision. The procedure can lead to infection and excessive bleeding. In some cases, infants have died as the result of complications from circumcision. In addition, adults who were circumcised as infants may face long-term complications. With the removal of the foreskin and other tissues also comes the removal of highly sensitive neuroreceptors and scarring. Thus, men who are circumcised may experience decreased sensation in their penis and experience higher rates of sexual dysfunction. Some research also suggests that some female sexual partners have a distinct preference for either circumcised or uncircumcised partners.

In the past decade, a number of activist groups have attempted to stop the routine circumcision of male infants, dubbing the practice a violation a human rights. As part of their efforts, these organizations have compared male circumcision to female genital cutting (also known as female genital mutilation or female circumcision). Such groups have provided public education about the health risks associated with the practice and supported legislation that would make routine circumcision illegal. However, the practice remains legal in all 50 states.

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See Also:

- [HIV/AIDS](#)
- [Islam](#)
- [Judaism and Orthodox Judaism](#)

#### Further Readings

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