

Care of the Intact Penis

Much nonsense has been written about the special care required for an intact ("uncircumcised") penis. Care advice can be summarised briefly:

1. Leave it alone.

(2. Leave it alone.)

(3. Leave it alone.)

(Very similar to the special care required by the ears and the eyes, really.)

Babies

A baby's penis should be washed like any other part of his body, gently. No effort should be made to retract his foreskin and wash inside. Nurses were once instructed to start trying to retract the foreskin from birth and ensure that it was fully retractable by the end of a week, doubtless causing many problems, and resulting in the "need" for circumcisions. This mentality persists in many places, and it may be necessary to make sure that any new person handling the baby (including nurses, nannies and grandparents) is not a "retractor".

Dr P. Catzel, Principal Paediatrician in the Paediatric Casualty Department of Johannesburg Hospital, South Africa writes:

"...we frequently see children with torn foreskins caused by forcing the foreskin back over the glans penis... The normal foreskin will in the normal course of events dilate sufficiently to slip over the head of the penis by 5 or 6 years of age. It does not require anyone's help to do this. The head of the penis does not require cleaning. Nature does the job very efficiently by means of natural secretions. The white material which collects under the foreskin is not dirt or pus but good healthy epithelial debris which will slowly but surely separate the adherent foreskin from the glans better than any nurse or doctor should do it. ...

"It is a good rule that if a baby passes a good stream of urine without causing ballooning of the foreskin, then that foreskin is entirely normal."

But "ballooning" is entirely normal too, though it can be alarming to mothers and others seeing it for the first time. (In fact it is a healthy way for the foreskin to separate from the glans and for the space inside the foreskin to be cleansed.) If the baby is not in pain and the flow of urine is free, there is still nothing to worry about.

Boys

The foreskin usually detaches itself from the glans and becomes retractable during babyhood and/or boyhood. The best person to discover this and encourage it is the boy himself. Again, Rule 1 applies.

As it becomes retractable, the boy should be encouraged to wash underneath it, using mild soap, if any (remember, smegma is Greek for "soap"). Stronger soaps are implicated in balanitis (irritation of the glans), and particular suspicion falls on bubble baths.

Youths

If they have not done so earlier, most intact young men learn to retract their foreskins as part of masturbation. (Attempts to enforce Rule 1 on them are misguided.)

Men

Some men have foreskins that still do not retract, and they are happy to leave them that way. If you are not (if you want it to retract for intercourse, for example) it can be freed non-surgically using an ointment (betamethasone 0.05% applied once or twice a day to the outside of the foreskin from the tip to about mid-glans for up to eight weeks), or surgically without circumcision. If you are in the US, this means looking for a foreskin-friendly urologist.

So when should I worry?

As with any other part of the body, seek help if there is pain, discharge, discolouration (bearing in mind that some redness of the tip of the foreskin is normal), bleeding or other change or unusual circumstance. Do not assume that any deviation from normality means circumcision will be required. It may be necessary to pick and choose your doctor to ensure that s/he does not have this mindset, and to seek a second opinion if s/he recommends circumcision. (Do not think you are abnormal for wanting to conserve the foreskin: what is abnormal is the view that it is dispensable and the wish to get rid of it.)

If the foreskin becomes inflamed (red and itching), a common cause is the fungus *Monilia*. This can be easily treated with an anti-fungal cream.

If the foreskin gets caught behind the glans (paraphimosis), a simple technique will free it: the area is lubricated and the glans is squeezed between clean fingers to make it small enough for the foreskin to come forward, a process similar to removing a ring from a swollen finger. It is very common for boys and men to be scheduled for circumcision after such an incident, but instead gentle tension over time, or betamethasone as above, is all that is needed, if the penis's owner is worried about it happening again.

Sometimes (after an erection during sleep, for example) the foreskin remains behind the glans and becomes swollen with fluid (oedematous). Even this is nothing to worry about, though it can look alarming. Once the foreskin is returned to its usual position the swelling will go down.

If the foreskin gets caught in a zipper (as a circumcised man's glans also may), lubricate the area with anything oily and apply an ice cube to numb and shrink the trapped skin. (If that doesn't release it, sacrifice the zipper by cutting across it and pulling the teeth apart, or use wire cutters or pliers to open the slide by snipping or bending the tiny tabs that hold the top on. That will allow the back to fall off and release the teeth, which can then be separated.)

So when is circumcision indicated?

If there is recurrent infection or inflammation of the glans or foreskin, and everything else has been tried and failed (as sometimes happens in men with diabetes, when the sugar in the urine feeds the bacteria), then it may be time to start thinking about circumcision, but it should be regarded as a desperate measure, like removing a frostbitten limb.

It is important to remember that routine circumcision has created a climate of worry about the foreskin and recourse to circum-cision at the first opportunity. What is normal, and what conservative measures are available, are not nearly as well known as they should be.

(This leaflet may not offer medical advice, but two paediatricians have checked it.)

Care of the Intact Penis

Downloaded from
www.circumstitions.com/Care.html
part of the Intactivism website
www.circumstitions.com
where much more information may be found.

The front page shows the Zeus of Artemisium, more than 2450 years old, fished out of the sea in 1928, now in the Archaeological Museum, Athens.

