

Circumcision

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Medicine, Anthropology, Sociology, Ethics, Religious Studies

1. Core Definition

Circumcision is defined as a surgical procedure that entails the removal of the foreskin, also known as the prepuce, from the human penis. The foreskin itself is a retractable fold of skin that naturally covers the glans penis. Anatomically, this structure is complex, composed of various tissues including smooth muscle, a network of blood vessels and neurons, skin, and mucous membrane. Although this procedure is most frequently carried out on infant males shortly after birth, it can also be performed later in life, during childhood or adulthood, based on medical necessity, religious requirements, or cultural mandates.

The operation requires specific surgical instruments and established techniques designed to safely excise the foreskin while mitigating pain, minimizing blood loss, and reducing the likelihood of complications. Meticulous post-operative care is mandatory to ensure proper healing and prevent infection. The ultimate decision to perform a circumcision is often the result of a complex negotiation among various factors, including deeply held cultural practices, religious obligations, perceived medical advantages, and personal beliefs held by the parents or the individual, leading to significant variance in prevalence and rationale across global societies.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "circumcision" is derived from the Latin roots "circum," meaning **around**, and "caedere," meaning **to cut**, resulting in the literal translation: "to cut around." This etymology accurately describes the precise surgical action required. The practice itself is exceptionally ancient, with historical evidence demonstrating its existence for millennia. Records from ancient Egypt, specifically scenes depicted in tombs dating back as early as 2400 BCE, visually confirm the procedure being performed, establishing its long-standing presence in human history and ritual.

Historically and globally, circumcision has been profoundly integrated into various religious and cultural frameworks. In **Judaism**, the Brit Milah, or Covenant of Circumcision, constitutes a foundational religious ritual. It is ceremonially performed on the eighth day after a male's birth and symbolizes an enduring covenantal relationship with God. Similarly, within **Islam**, male circumcision is universally practiced as a tradition (Sunnah) and a significant rite of passage, although the precise timing of the procedure exhibits greater variation than in Judaism. Beyond the Abrahamic traditions, indigenous cultures across Africa, Australia, and the Pacific Islands have maintained the practice for centuries, utilizing it as a ritual marker of tribal identity, the acquisition of social status, or the crucial transition from boyhood into manhood.

In Western societies, particularly those influenced by English-speaking cultures, the routine practice of infant male circumcision for non-religious, prophylactic reasons gained considerable momentum during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This surge was primarily fueled by evolving medical theories promoting hygiene and claiming the prevention of various pathological conditions. However, it is crucial to note that many of these early medical claims have since been subjected to rigorous critical re-evaluation. The procedure became a widespread prophylactic measure, distinct from its ancient religious and cultural origins, resulting in a period of high prevalence, particularly in regions such as the United States.

3. Key Characteristics

Permanent Anatomical Modification: The essential characteristic of circumcision is the partial or complete surgical excision of the prepuce, which results in the permanent exposure of the glans penis. This constitutes an irreversible alteration to the male anatomy.

Diverse and Layered Motivations: The reasons underlying the performance of circumcision are extensive and multi-layered. These motivations range from strict religious obligation and entrenched cultural tradition to the pursuit of perceived hygienic benefits, the prevention or treatment of specific medical conditions (e.g., phimosis), and parental choice influenced by social norms or personal belief systems.

Variability in Timing and Context: While it is most commonly performed during the neonatal period, often within days of birth in medical and some religious settings, the procedure's timing can vary significantly. It may occur at prescribed ages during childhood as part of traditional puberty rites or, alternatively, in adulthood, frequently necessitated by medical issues or conversion to a religion that requires it.

Marked Global Prevalence Disparities: The global rate of male circumcision is highly disparate across different geographical regions and demographic populations. Prevalence remains significantly high in areas containing large Jewish and Muslim communities, large swathes of Africa, and the United States. Conversely, rates are markedly lower across most of Western Europe, South America, and various parts of Asia, illustrating the procedure's cultural specificity.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance of circumcision is profound and far-reaching, impacting religious, cultural, medical, and ethical spheres. From a religious perspective, it functions as a deep-seated symbol of faith, communal identity, and adherence to divine or ancestral covenants. For Jewish males, it represents an unbroken connection to their heritage and remains a central pillar of religious observance. Similarly, for many Muslim communities, it is considered an essential component of a boy's development, embodying principles of spiritual cleanliness and submission to religious

teachings, thereby establishing its crucial spiritual and communal dimensions worldwide.

Sociologically and culturally, circumcision frequently serves as a potent **rite of passage**, signaling transitions in social standing or maturity. It actively reinforces group identity, clearly distinguishing community members, and facilitates the intergenerational transmission of traditional values. In societies where the practice is widespread and normative, a lack of circumcision can regrettably lead to social stigma or feelings of exclusion, underscoring its significant sociological impact on both individual and collective belonging. Conversely, in cultures where the procedure is rare, opting for circumcision might be perceived as a highly unusual or non-standard decision.

From a medical standpoint, the health implications of circumcision have been rigorously debated and extensively researched. Proponents frequently highlight potential health benefits, including a statistically reduced risk of urinary tract infections (UTIs) during infancy, lower rates of certain sexually transmitted infections (STIs), notably a reduced risk of HIV acquisition among heterosexual men in high-prevalence settings, and the definitive prevention of conditions such as **phimosis** and **paraphimosis**. However, it is essential that these potential benefits are carefully weighed against the inherent risks associated with any surgical intervention.

While potential prophylactic benefits exist, the procedure carries associated surgical risks, which include pain, localized bleeding, infection, and, in rare instances, severe complications or unfavorable cosmetic outcomes. The highly complex subject of the procedure's long-term effects on adult sexual sensation and function remains a topic of active and complex discussion and ongoing research within the medical and academic communities. Consequently, major medical organizations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), typically issue nuanced policy guidelines that acknowledge potential health benefits while strongly emphasizing the necessity of parental choice based on fully informed consent and appropriate anesthetic use.

5. Debates and Criticisms

In contemporary discourse, circumcision, especially when performed on non-consenting infants for non-therapeutic reasons, has emerged as a topic of significant ethical controversy. The core of the opposition centers on the principle of **bodily autonomy**. Critics assert that subjecting an infant to an irreversible surgical procedure violates their fundamental future right to make autonomous decisions regarding their own physical body. This perspective maintains that such a decision should ideally be postponed until the individual attains the age of competence necessary to provide genuinely informed consent, unless the procedure is medically necessary to treat an immediate health risk.

Opponents of routine infant circumcision further raise serious concerns regarding the ethics of pain experienced by infants during the surgery, even when effective pain relief measures are utilized. They fundamentally challenge the justification for what they categorize as a non-essential surgery

that inherently carries risks, however minor, when contrasted with perceived benefits that are often subject to medical debate or could potentially be addressed through alternative, non-surgical management techniques later in life. Advocacy groups against routine procedures often also highlight potential long-term psychological impacts, although definitive research supporting these claims is complex and less clearly established.

From a human rights perspective, certain advocacy groups argue forcefully that the non-consensual circumcision of minors constitutes a violation of children's rights, specifically the right to **physical integrity** and freedom from non-therapeutic physical interventions. This strong human rights stance frequently enters into tension with the deeply held religious and cultural rights of parents to raise and guide their children in accordance with their established traditions. The legal and ethical frameworks designed to govern this highly sensitive issue vary dramatically across different global jurisdictions, reflecting the inherent complexity, sensitivity, and lack of universal consensus surrounding the debate.

Further Reading

[World Health Organization \(WHO\) - Male Circumcision for HIV Prevention](#)

[American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\) - Circumcision Policy Statement](#)

[Jewish Virtual Library - Circumcision \(Brit Milah\)](#)

[Encyclopaedia Britannica - Circumcision](#)

[Human Rights Watch - Germany: Ensure Religious Freedom and Child Rights in Circumcision Debate](#)