

# Myths About Circumcision You Likely Believe

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When I was pregnant with my first child, I just thought that circumcision was what you did, no big deal, and that every man was circumcised. Then one day I saw a picture of a baby being circumcised, and everything changed. Just one tiny, grainy photo was enough to make me want to know more.

**Myth:** *They just cut off a flap of skin.*

**Reality check:** The foreskin is half of the penis's skin, not just a flap. In an adult man, the foreskin is 15 square inches of skin. In babies and children, the foreskin is adhered to the head of the penis with the same type of tissue that adheres fingernails to their nail beds. Removing it requires inserting a blunt probe between the foreskin and the head of the penis and then cutting down and around the whole penis.

**Myth:** *It doesn't ever hurt the baby.*

**Reality check:** In 1997, doctors in Canada (Lander 1997) did a study to see what type of anesthesia was most effective in relieving the pain of circumcision. As with any study, they needed a control group that received no anesthesia. The doctors quickly realized that the babies who were not anesthetized were in so much pain that it would be unethical to continue with the study. Even the best commonly available method of pain relief studied, the dorsal penile nerve block, did not block all the babies' pain.

**Myth:***My doctor uses anesthesia.*

**Reality check:** Not necessarily. Most newborns do not receive adequate anesthesia (Stang, 1998). Only 45% of doctors who do circumcisions use any anesthesia at all. Obstetricians perform 70% of circumcisions and are least likely to use anesthesia—only 25% do. The most common reasons why they don't? They didn't think the procedure warranted it, and it takes too long (Stang 1998).

**Myth:***It can't cause the baby long-term harm.*

**Reality check:** Circumcision has an array of risks and side effects. There is a 1-3% complication rate during the newborn period alone (Schwartz 1990). Here is a short list of potential complications. See Goldman (1997) for a thorough discussion.

*Meatal Stenosis:* This is a narrowing of the urethra which can interfere with urination and require surgery to fix.

*Adhesions.* Circumcised babies can suffer from adhesions, where the foreskin remnants try to heal to the head of the penis in an area they are not supposed to grow on.

*Buried penis.* Circumcision can lead to trapped or buried penis—too much skin is removed, and so the penis is forced inside the body.

*Infection.* The circumcision wound can become infected.

But, you say, aren't there important health benefits? See [this post](#).

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