

## *Encyclopedia Americana 1984, Volume 6, Page 735.*

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**CIRCUMCISION**, sŭr-kem-sizh'en, in men, the surgical removal of all or part of the foreskin, the sleeve of tissue covering the glans of the penis. In women the term circumcision refers primarily to removal of the clitoral foreskin and secondarily to a variety of other genital operations.

**Male Circumcision.** Circumcision is an obligatory religious or puberty rite among Muslims, Jews, many black Africans, and some other peoples, including Maya, Aztecs, and Fiji Islanders. When, where, how, and by whom the operation is performed vary from group to group. Circumcision is not practiced by about 80% of the world's population, including most residents of continental Europe and Asia (except Muslims), and most residents of the Western Hemisphere south of the Rio Grande.

An ancient operation of unknown origin, circumcision of males was performed originally with flint knives prior to the use of metal. The earliest artifacts - from Egypt - are dated at about 4000 B.C., centuries before its adoption by the ancient Hebrews. In traditional Judaism circumcision represents a covenant between God and Abraham (Genesis 17). Early Christians rejected the practice (Acts 15). Although the word does not appear in the Koran, circumcision was practiced among Arabs in pre-Islamic times.

Originally, it is likely that no health claims were attributed to circumcision. Millennia later, however, Herodotus, Philo, and other ancient Greeks suggested that the practice might have hygienic benefits, although it was not adopted by the Greeks. In the late 19th century, circumcision came to be viewed in English-speaking countries as a panacea to stop masturbation, which was thought to cause many illnesses. The American physician [P. C. Remondino](#), in his once highly regarded and often-quoted book *History of Circumcision From the Earliest Times to the Present* (1891), claimed that circumcision prevented or cured about 100 ailments, including among them alcoholism, epilepsy, hernia, and lunacy.

Circumcision for reasons of health continued in all English-speaking countries well into the mid-20th century. Today, however, the practice has been virtually abandoned in Britain and New Zealand, and circumcision rates have been reduced markedly in Canada and Australia. But in the United States about 80% of infant boys still are circumcised in spite of authoritative medical opposition to the practice. [Editor's note: the rate of infant circumcision in the U.S. has dropped. Today, approximately 60% of American boys are circumcised in infancy.]

In [1975](#) the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that "there are no valid medical indications for circumcision in the neonatal period." In [1978](#) the American

College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists endorsed the academy's position. Both of these groups reaffirmed this judgment in a 1983 report, *Guidelines for Perinatal Care*.

Nevertheless, some U.S. physicians claim that circumcision is essential for penile hygiene; that it prevents venereal disease and premature ejaculation; and that smegma (the normal sebaceous gland secretion under the foreskin) is a carcinogen, causing cancer of the penis, prostate, and cervix. These claims are not supported by epidemiological data. Moreover, smegma can be found under the clitoral foreskin of women, as well as under the foreskins of some other mammals of both sexes, and it apparently causes no harm.

Circumcision occasionally is a medical necessity and is so recognized worldwide. However among 80% of the world's population where circumcision is not practiced, the initial approach to foreskin problems is usually medical and only rarely surgical. As a surgical procedure, circumcision may result in hemorrhage, infection, surgical injury and even, although it happens very rarely, in death.

**Female Circumcision.** The origin of the various forms of female circumcision is unknown. Still practiced in Africa, including parts of Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, and Kenya, the method and timing of the operation vary from group to group. According to a 1981 United Nations report, the practice is declining owing to opposition by African women.

Clitoridectomy was performed in England and the United States from the 1860's to about 1920 to treat what were considered "emotional" problems of women. It rarely is performed today except for advanced cancer or extreme enlargement of the clitoris. True female circumcision is occasionally employed in the United States to attempt to enhance orgasmic response. The success of the procedure has not been scientifically evaluated.

[Encyclopedia entry written by] Edward Wallerstein, Author of "*Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy*"