

Foreskin Care and Problems

What normally happens to the foreskin?

At birth the foreskin is normally attached to the head of the penis (glans) by a layer of cells. The glans at birth is delicate and easily irritated by urine and feces. The foreskin protects the glans. Over the next 5 or 10 years the foreskin will naturally separate from the head of the penis without any help. It gradually loosens up (retracts) a little at a time. Normal erections during childhood probably cause most of the change by stretching the foreskin.

What problems can occur?

The foreskin generally causes no problems. However, forcing the foreskin back before it has fully loosened can cause it to get stuck behind the head of the penis, causing severe pain and swelling. If retraction causes bleeding, scar tissue may form and interfere with natural retraction. Occasionally, the space under the foreskin becomes infected. Most of these problems can be prevented.

How can I take care of my child?

In general, the foreskin requires minimal care. The following suggestions will help maintain good hygiene.

During the first year of life, clean only the outside of the foreskin. Don't try to retract the foreskin. Don't put any cotton swabs in the opening.

Gentle, partial retraction can begin when your son is 1 or 2 years old. It can be done once a week during bathing. Gently pull the skin on the shaft of the penis downward toward the abdomen. This will make the foreskin open up, revealing the end of the glans. Be gentle - retraction should never cause pain or crying.

During retraction, clean the exposed part of the glans with water. Wipe away any whitish material (smegma) that you find there. Smegma is just dead skin cells that are normally shed from the glans and lining of the foreskin throughout life. Do not use soap or leave soapy water under the foreskin because this can cause irritation and swelling. After cleansing, always pull the foreskin forward to its normal position. (Note: A collection of smegma that is seen or felt through the foreskin, but which lies beyond the point to which the foreskin is retractable, should be left alone until normal separation exposes it.)

Avoid vigorous retraction because this can cause pain, bleeding, or the foreskin to become stuck behind the head of the penis (this is called paraphimosis). Retraction is excessive if it causes any discomfort or crying.

By the time your son is 5 or 6 years old, teach him to retract his own foreskin and clean beneath it once a week during baths to prevent poor hygiene and infection. Gentle reminders are necessary in the early years.

In general, foreskin retraction is overdone. Any degree of foreskin movement is normal as long as your boy has a normal urine stream. There should be no rush to

achieve full retraction. Full retraction always occurs naturally by puberty. As the foreskin becomes retractable on its own, your son should cleanse beneath it to prevent infections.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- The foreskin is pulled back and stuck behind the head of the penis.
- Your child can't pass any urine.
- Your child starts acting very sick.

Call within 24 hours if:

- The foreskin looks infected (yellow pus, spreading redness or streaks).
- You have other concerns or questions.

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