Your Decision About Circumcision

Circumcision is an elective cosmetic surgery that permanently removes the uniquely erogenous penile foreskin. It's important to understand that your choice will affect your son for his entire life. This handout provides information about potential long-term concerns that may not become apparent until your child is older.

Your Child's Future Autonomy

The most common reason parents choose not to circumcise is their wish for the child to make his own choice when he is older and can consent for himself.[1] Unlike medical decisions that parents make for their children, the alleged benefits of circumcision are at the "weakest level."[2] There is almost never any medical need for newborn circumcision—it is a nontherapeutic surgery that irreversibly alters a healthy body part.[3,5]

Some men who were circumcised as infants later report feeling that their autonomy was violated by having this permanent modification made to this most-intimate part of their bodies without their consent.[4]

Your son will live with your choice throughout his life, including when he becomes sexually active.

Potential Long-Term Psychological Effects

Emerging research suggests that some men experience psychological distress related to their infant circumcision. Studies have identified men who report:[4,6]

- Feelings of grief, anger or violation regarding their circumcised condition
- Anxiety and distress (often lifelong) related to the permanent alteration of their genitals
- A "discovery process," often starting at a very young age,[6] about their circumcised condition and awareness about the functional value of the part of their penis that was destroyed
- Concerns about bodily autonomy and consent resulting from their unwanted circumcision

One study found that men circumcised in infancy reported lower attachment security, lower emotional stability, higher perceived stress, and lower self-esteem compared to intact men.[6,7,8] Another study identified men who described their feelings about circumcision using terms like "violation" and "mutilation."[7,9,10]

> ***"Some people say they never heard a man complain about being circumcised. Increasingly, circumcised men are overcoming resentment, fear, and shame to discuss their harm and their wish that this intimate choice had been left to them."***
>
> **— Tim Hammond, GALDEF executive director**

While not all circumcised men experience these feelings, your son's reaction to being circumcised may differ from your expectations and may not emerge until he is older.[10]

Parents Making a Sexual Decision for Their Son

Consciously or not, with a permanent, irreversible surgery like circumcision, parents are essentially making a sexual decision for their son that has lifelong consequences.[14]

The foreskin contains specialized nerve endings and serves pleasurable functions during sexual activity. Some circumcised men report longterm sexual concerns that become apparent after the penis is fully developed and they become sexually active, including:[6]

- Reduced penile sensitivity
- Pain during erections
- Feeling that their sexual experience was negatively altered
- Difficulty completing sexual activity

The medical literature on sexual function after circumcision is mixed. While some studies suggest no significant adverse effects on sexual function,[12] other research has documented that some men experience sexual difficulties they attribute to their circumcision.[4,6–11]

Physical Complications That May Appear Later

While immediate complications of circumcision are relatively uncommon,[13] other more common problems may not become apparent until later in childhood or adulthood when your son becomes sexually active and may require corrective surgeries:[4,6–10]

- Meatal stenosis (narrowing of the urinary opening)
- Painful skin bridges (penile adhesions)
- Excessive skin removal causing tight, painful erections
- Scarring, pigmentation, and adverse cosmetic issues

More Reasons to Wait

Growing numbers of circumcised men are engaged in time-consuming nonsurgical foreskin restoration to regain genital integrity,[11] but the erogenous tissue removed cannot be replaced.

Adult circumcision is much less common than the infant procedure, which suggests that circumcision is either unnecessary or unwanted by the vast majority of intact men.

Waiting allows your son to:

- Make his own informed choice about his body
- Understand the risks and benefits for himself
- Consent to irreversible genital surgery
- Avoid a permanent modification he may later regret

Changing Legal Landscape

International medical associations discourage nontherapeutic newborn circumcision, a trend that the U.S. is following. Some men who were circumcised as children have filed lawsuits against hospitals and their circumcisers.

In one case, GALDEF assisted a plaintiff who sued the hospital, which retaliated by suing the plaintiff's mother for giving her consent. At one Connecticut hospital, its consent form now cautions that the parent carries the liability burden if the child later becomes aware that he was harmed.

Questions to Consider

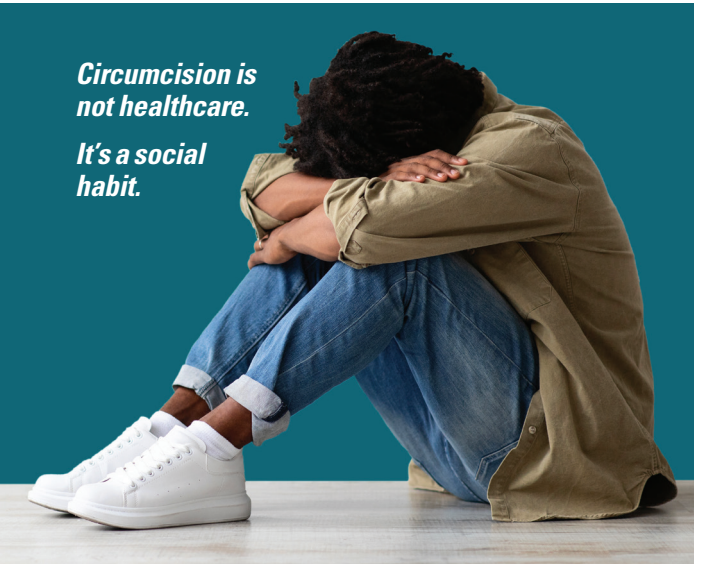
- Are you aware that the alleged medical benefits of circumcision are not sufficient for major medical organizations to recommend the surgery universally?[2,3]
- Are you comfortable making a decision about your son's genitals that he cannot reverse?
- Have you considered that your son's feelings about his body may differ from your own cultural or personal preferences, and how this may affect his relationship with you?
- How will you explain this choice to your son if he later wishes he had not been circumcised?

Conclusion

When your son is a newborn, it's impossible to know the full psychosexual impact that your choice will have on him.

There is no medical urgency to decide about circumcision at birth. Your son can always choose to be circumcised later. He cannot reverse a circumcision that was imposed on him.

Taking time to consider long-term implications is appropriate and important.



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Many references below are accessible at:
www.galdef.org/resources-for-attorneys

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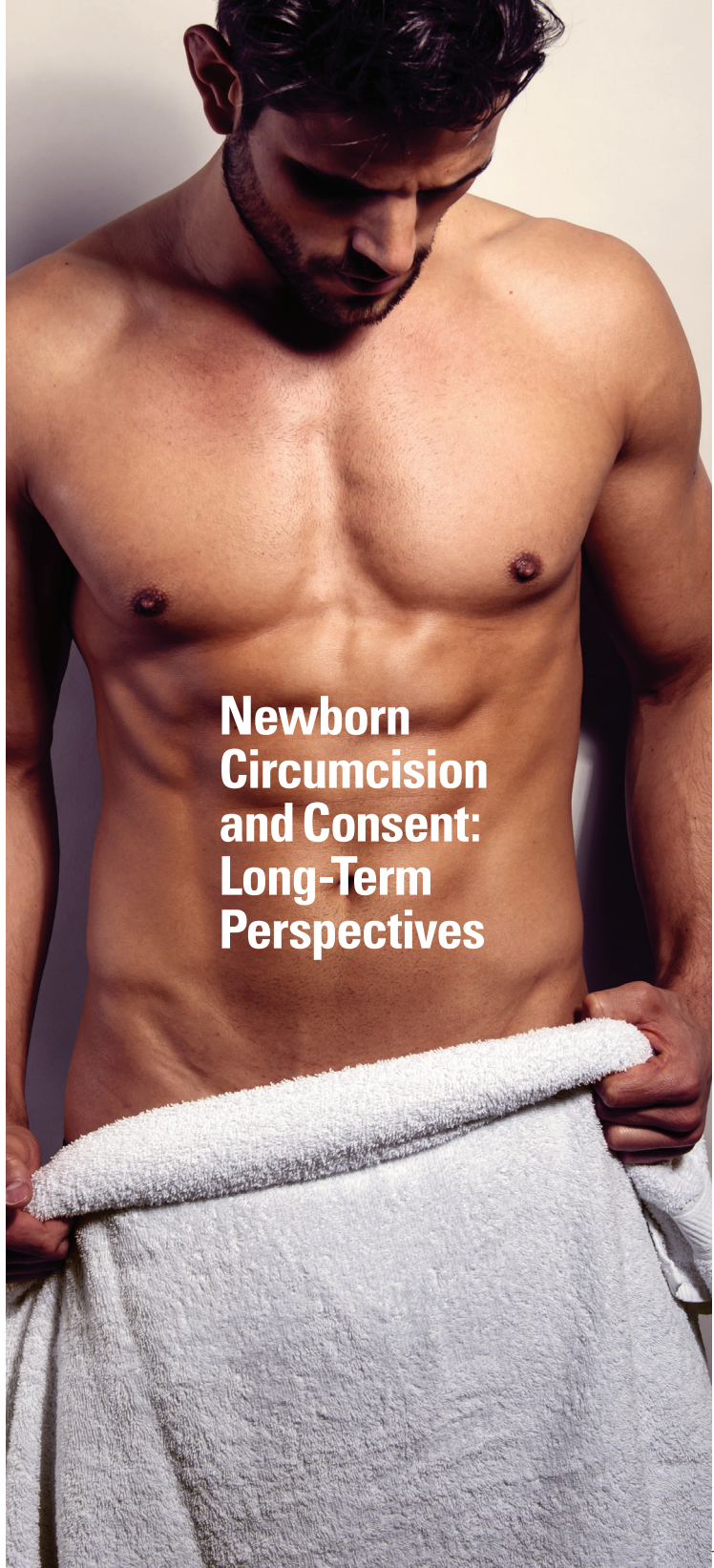

Newborn Circumcision and Consent: Long-Term Perspectives