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The Circumcision Decision

If your baby is a boy, you will be asked if you want him circumcised. This is a matter you should think about very carefully before your baby is born. Circumcisions are usually done soon after birth. Many parents prefer to discuss their questions with the pediatrician well in advance, so that they have time to talk things over together and reach a decision both are comfortable with. Here are some of the questions parents ask:

What is circumcision?

Baby boys are born with a covering (the foreskin) over the sensitive end (glans) of the penis. A circumcision is a procedure to remove the skin, leaving the end of the penis uncovered. The procedure takes about 15 minutes to perform. Newborn babies can feel pain, so most doctors use local anesthesia (medicine to decrease pain). Ask your doctor about this. Even when local anesthesia is used, babies may feel some pain for a short time after the procedure.

Why are circumcisions performed?

Circumcisions are done for many reasons. Muslims and Jews perform circumcisions for religious reasons. Other people choose to have their sons circumcised so the baby will look like his father. There are many countries in the world where circumcision is almost never done.

Circumcision is not required by law and is not medically necessary. It doesn't affect future sexual enjoyment and won't prevent a man from becoming infected with most sexually transmitted disease, although it may decrease the chances of acquiring some of these diseases.

Circumcision of newborn boys does help prevent cancer of the penis. The risk that an uncircumcised boy will develop cancer of the penis in later life is about 1 in 600. Careful attention to cleanliness may help decrease the risk in men who are uncircumcised. Circumcision also decreases the risk that a baby boy will develop a urinary tract infection during his first few years of life. Uncircumcised boys have a 1% risk of developing a urinary infection in the first 12 months of life; circumcised boys have a 0.1% risk.

What are the risks of circumcision?

As with any medical procedure, complications may occur. One large study found that about two babies out of every 100 had a problem following surgery. The most common problems are:

- Heavy bleeding, rarely requiring blood transfusion. Bleeding happens in 1 of 100 babies who are circumcised.
- Infection of the penis. This happens in 1 in 500 babies and rarely, may require treating the baby with intravenous antibiotics.
- The foreskin may be cut too short or left too long, or may heal improperly. In rare cases, a second procedure may be needed to correct the problem.

How do you keep the penis clean if your child is not circumcised?

When you take your baby home, you do not need to do anything special. The foreskin of a newborn cannot be pulled back, and so just by bathing your baby, you are keeping the penis clean. After the baby is 1 year old, you can gently try to pull back the foreskin while you are bathing him. If the foreskin moves easily, wash the end of the penis and carefully place the foreskin back over the end of the penis. If you cannot pull the foreskin back, don't worry. This is perfectly normal and you can try again in a few months. As your child grows, the foreskin will gradually become retractable. Just as you will teach your son to wash his hands and face, you can teach him to clean his penis.

It is your decision.

Before you decide to have your son circumcised, it is important that you understand what the procedure is and what the possible problems are. Please ask your nurse or doctor any questions you may have before you sign the consent form. Your nurse or doctor will show you how to care for your baby after the procedure.