The foreskin is the sheath of thin skin that normally covers and protects the head of the penis.

Foreskin care for boys

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The foreskin (or prepuce) is the sheath of thin skin normally covering the head of the penis (glans). The inner foreskin is attached to the penile shaft just beyond the glans, with a small band (the frenulum) approaching the opening of the urinary passage (urethral meatus) on the undersurface. Its function and natural development must be understood to ensure proper care.

The foreskin protects the glans and urethral meatus in the diapered baby, preventing irritation from contact with urine. In older boys and men, the foreskin continues to protect the sensitive glans. The foreskin may also have specific functions related to sensation and immunity.

At birth, the inner foreskin is usually fused to the glans. This prevents it from being pulled back or retracted to uncover the glans. Normal urination should not be affected. As your child matures, the inner foreskin will gradually separate from the glans, allowing progressive retraction. The foreskin should never be retracted forcefully.

The age at which the foreskin becomes completely retractable is quite variable. By three years, most boys can retract their foreskin at least partially. Only 1-2% of boys are still not able to retract their foreskin by the age of seventeen.

Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin. Some parents chose to have their sons circumcised for social, cosmetic or ritual reasons. In others this operation is necessary due to problems with the foreskin. Routine circumcision of newborn boys, once very popular, is now much less common. Several medical organizations have discouraged routine circumcision after considering the risks and benefits of this surgery.

Possible problems

Occasionally, a problem with the foreskin may require medical attention.

- All over the body, skin cells are shed continuously as they die off and are replaced by new ones. This turnover usually occurs without notice. Cell replacement also takes place on the inner foreskin and glans. When the foreskin is not yet retractable, the dead skin cells may build up into soft, yellow or white lumps apparent under the skin. This is called smegma. This buildup is a natural and harmless process that may help separate the foreskin from the glans. The smegma will eventually work its way out as the foreskin becomes retractable.

- In some boys, the foreskin may be retractable even if the tip is a bit narrow. If the foreskin is replaced over the glans shortly after your child voids or bathes, this narrowing should not cause any trouble. In time the tight area should stretch and disappear. However, if your child leaves the foreskin retracted, this narrow ring may become trapped behind the glans causing pain and swelling of the penis. This is called a paraphimosis. Medical attention should...