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Foreskin Management – Fact Sheet

This fact sheet lists a range of questions on foreskin problems which were posted by visitors via the Health Channel. Experts provide the answers.

Q. There is a thin white skin-like layer formed between my foreskin and penis. What is that?

The layer you describe between your penis and your foreskin is probably connective tissue that allows your foreskin to retract over the top of your penis when you become sexually aroused. If this layer of skin wasn't there, it may be difficult for this to occur. However, if you are concerned about this layer of skin, or it is causing you problems in any way, you should consult your doctor and have it examined. It is unlikely that your doctor will detect any abnormality, but this consultation may reassure you that everything is OK.

Q. My son is five and a half and his foreskin cannot be retracted. Does this mean he will have to be circumcised?

At birth, a boy's foreskin is naturally stuck to the head of the penis. As he gets older, the foreskin separates and can more easily be pulled back from the tip of the penis. The age at which the foreskin becomes retractable differs for each child. For many boys, this happens around the ages of two to six years. However, for some boys it may not happen until puberty. This is all normal.

You should never forcibly pull back your son's foreskin for cleaning, as this can cause pain, bleeding, scarring or infection. Just wash the penis as you would any other part of the body and be careful to wash off any soap. Once your son's foreskin is easily retracted, he can learn to do his own foreskin care as part of his normal bath-time routine. Make sure he rinses off any soap and pulls the foreskin back over the head of the penis afterwards.

Of course, if there is a problem such as infection, swelling, pain or a retracted foreskin that cannot un-retract, you should consult your doctor. Rarely, a congenital condition exists where the foreskin cannot be retracted. If this is the case, circumcision may be advised. Sometimes the tip of the foreskin becomes reddened. This is called balanitis – this is quite common and is not a cause for concern unless it continues to recur.

If at puberty your son finds that his foreskin disturbs normal sexual function or erection, an assessment by the doctor can tell you if something should or needs to be done. This may involve non-surgical procedures or circumcision may be recommended. Your doctor can advise you about your son's options.

Some people are opposed to circumcision for religious or cultural reasons. In such cases, it may be possible to widen the foreskin to allow retraction without removing the foreskin.

Q. My 11-year-old son has already reached puberty. His penis is about 4½ inches (11.5cm) and he is not circumcised. I noticed that he cannot bring the foreskin back over the entire head – only about a quarter of an inch – and there seems to be some slight bend or curve. Should I be concerned?

Many boys can retract the foreskin by about two years of age but it may not happen until puberty. Once your son's foreskin is easily retracted, he can learn to do his own foreskin care as part of his normal bath-time routine.

Your son should be able to slide his foreskin back by the time he reaches puberty – consult with your doctor if this does not happen. Certain conditions, including infections under the foreskin, may result in scarring and cause the tissue of the foreskin to stick to the head of the penis.

Q. I am 27 and have just recently had sex for the first time. I found it quite painful, as my foreskin was very tight to retract over the head of my penis. I have never had that done before. When I tried a few times afterwards I have found the same difficulty. Is this because my foreskin needs stretching over time or is this problem not going to go away?

Retraction of the foreskin during intercourse should become more comfortable by natural process gradually

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over time, although this may take several weeks. You can try retracting the foreskin while urinating, bathing or showering. This may help to make it more comfortable during intercourse.

Retraction should not exceed what is comfortable. There is no need to 'stretch' the foreskin further than is necessary to retract over the head of the penis. Once this is achieved, the next step is for the foreskin to become stretched enough to comfortably accommodate an erection.

It may be pushed gently back over the erect penis on a regular basis, until it is fully retractable. For some people, it can take several weeks of daily stretching to attain normal function. Until smooth retraction is achieved, a water-based lubricant will help make intercourse more comfortable (you can get them from the supermarket or chemist). The use of the GFS Balloon from Platigo Corporation can greatly help and fast track this process. Go to <http://gfs.platigo.com> for more information or see their advertisements in our site <http://phimosis.com.au>

Vigorous cleansing should be avoided. Soaps or other cleansing agents under the foreskin are unnecessary and may be counter-productive. If progress is not achieved within a few weeks, or if there is any skin rash or bleeding noticed, a simple check by your doctor will establish whether there is any other problem present (such as skin infection or inflammation) or if any additional treatment is required.

Q. I have a small penis when not erect but it is above average size when erect. Because of this, my foreskin sometimes gets little splits in it as it stretches over the head of my penis. This is very painful. Is there anything I can do?

There is a substantial range in the size of men's penises. This is particularly the case when they are not erect. In fact, males with smaller penises find their penis grows quite a bit more during erection than males whose penises are larger when not erect. This means there is a much smaller variation in the size of erect penises. The problem you are experiencing is not due to your penis being smaller to begin with. You may be able to use a lubricant to help the foreskin contract over the top of the penis during erection. If this doesn't help, consult your doctor, as you may be able to have a small operation that can help your foreskin contract so that you do not continue to experience pain during sex. The use of the GFS Balloon from Platigo Corporation can greatly help and fast track this process. Go to <http://gfs.platigo.com> for more information or see their advertisements in our site <http://phimosis.com.au>

Q. I think I may have a problem with my bladder, as my penis tightens even after urination.

Phimosis is a condition where there is tightness of the foreskin. This can sometimes result in swelling of the foreskin when passing urine. The foreskin may cause a constriction and require medical assistance. Sometimes circumcision is recommended. Local infection can cause soreness, and antifungal or antibiotic treatment is prescribed if this is the case. It is not likely that the bladder is the cause of such problems. You should visit your doctor if you are concerned.

Q. I am diabetic and, as a result, I am constantly suffering with thrush, which causes painful splits to occur on the foreskin. Is there any way that I can permanently remove the fungus from my system thus eliminating this painful and embarrassing problem?

By taking antifungal medication when you first detect symptoms of thrush, this should keep it under control. Unfortunately, the problem is that the fungus frequently remains in your system, and it only takes a small change in your health for it to flare up. Triggers may include bacterial infection, stress or – in your case – diabetes. It is worth talking to your doctor about what preventative measures you could take given your particular situation.

Q. I am a 42 year old male who feels my penis was damaged by routine infant circumcision. I have heard of surgical foreskin restoration. Can you please tell me about this procedure and how I would go about obtaining treatment?

Generally, routine infant circumcision should not leave any significant scarring. Variations in the appearance of the healed area may contribute to a perception of damage. While there is usually no clinical significance, it may still affect a person's self-image and should be considered seriously to avoid developing unnecessary emotional distress.

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Although rare, it is possible that excessive scarring has occurred due to postoperative infection. It is important that you have a thorough urological examination before considering repair procedures. Surgical foreskin restoration procedures may carry a risk of complications including infection, worsening or tightening of the scarring, and should only be considered after full urological assessment.

Where to get help

Your doctor
Men's health clinic
Sexual Health Centre
Family Planning Groups

Cleaning of the Foreskin:

Like other parts of the body, the foreskin should be cleaned regularly. Warm water and a properly functioning foreskin are ideal. You can read many websites that contain information about cleaning. Some mention using soap and some say do not use soap.

Cleaning is best done as part of your daily shower routine. If you notice a smell, pain, swelling, discomfort or change you should contact your doctor for advice.

The most important aspect of a clean foreskin is that it is functioning normally and you can fully retract it without it getting stuck halfway or part way.

If you have any doubts about the cleaning process you should ask your doctor or pharmacists or men's health clinic for specific advice.