

Male Circumcision

In the United States, male circumcision is very common. Between 1979 and 2010, male circumcision rates were consistently over 55% with a high of 64.9% in 1981.¹ Though the practice was once rarely questioned, and was often considered a routine medical procedure performed at birth (or shortly thereafter), it has become a topic of controversy. For example, a bill currently before the Icelandic parliament would prohibit male circumcisions performed for non-medical reasons.²

For some religions, male circumcision is an important initiation rite. Many Jewish and Muslim parents, for instance, see circumcision as a key part of their religious and cultural identity, and therefore believe that they have an obligation to circumcise their sons.³ Given its religious significance, defenders of male circumcision claim that they have a moral right to continue this practice.

Additionally, some proponents of male circumcision stress its medical benefits. There is evidence that male circumcision decreases the risk of urinary tract infections, penile cancer, and the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases—especially HIV. For these reasons, proponents sometimes claim that circumcision is morally on par with vaccination. Because there are strong moral reasons to vaccinate children, there are also strong moral reasons to circumcise male children.

Opponents of male circumcision present two arguments for their view. First, they claim that the medical benefits are overblown. The increased risk of urinary tract infections is about 1% (which means that 100 boys would have to be circumcised to prevent one urinary tract infection) and the increased risk of penile cancer is very small (more than 300,000 boys would have to be circumcised to prevent one case of penile cancer).⁴ Finally, though there does seem to be strong evidence that circumcision can slow the spread of HIV, especially in areas with high rates of HIV, the problem is not nearly as significant in areas with low rates of HIV and can be prevented by practicing safe sex anyway.

All that said, the main argument that opponents of male circumcision give for their position is that male circumcision is morally wrong. Some might argue that this is so even when performed for religious or cultural reasons. It is, after all, a form of invasive surgery, performed without the consent of the patient, that permanently removes a part of the body. In that sense, male circumcision is wrong for some of the same reasons that female circumcision is often considered to be wrong: It violates autonomy, it violates bodily integrity, and it causes pain. Opponents grant that female circumcision is morally worse because it is usually performed for reasons having to do with the oppression of women whereas male circumcision isn't. But most opponents of female circumcision don't think that it is wrong only because of the oppressive conditions under which it is performed. Though many forms of female circumcision are more physically damaging than male circumcision, nonetheless that's a difference in degree and not in kind.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Should parents be allowed to have their sons circumcised?
2. What considerations should parents take into account when making decisions on behalf of their children?
3. Is there a moral difference between performing male circumcision for medical purposes and performing it for religious or cultural reasons?

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/circumcision_2013/circumcision_2013.htm

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/18/iceland-ban-male-circumcision-first-european-country>

³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/jewishethics/circumcision_1.shtml

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/10/upshot/why-science-cant-help-you-much-in-deciding-on-circumcision.html>

