HEALTH BASICS

Care and cleaning uncircumcised penis

Simple guidance for safely washing a penis with an intact foreskin

WHAT IT IS
Routine washing of the penis and foreskin

WHERE IT COMES UP
Daily washing, diaper care, puberty, and foreskin concerns

WHY IT MATTERS
Gentle care limits irritation and removes normal buildup

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, pediatric clinician, sexual health service, or urologist

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Visual examination when pain, swelling, or tightness needs assessment

Overview

An uncircumcised penis has a foreskin covering some or all of the head of the penis. The foreskin is normal body tissue. It protects sensitive skin and usually becomes easier to pull back, or retract, as a child grows.

Routine care is simple. Wash the outside gently. If the foreskin retracts easily, it can be pulled back for rinsing and then returned to its normal position. It should never be forced.

In babies and young children, the foreskin is often naturally attached to the head of the penis. It may not retract for years. This is normal and does not need treatment or special cleaning underneath.

There is no routine test for cleanliness or normal foreskin development. Questions can usually be addressed through a conversation and, if needed, a simple physical examination.

How it works

The foreskin is a movable fold of skin. The head of the penis underneath is called the glans. At birth, the inner foreskin and glans are usually joined. They gradually separate as the penis

develops.

Natural erections and normal skin shedding help this separation happen. The timing differs from person to person. A foreskin that does not retract in a baby or young child is not, by itself, a problem.

As separation occurs, small white or yellowish lumps may appear under the foreskin. These are often collections of shed skin cells called smegma. Smegma is not pus and does not automatically mean there is an infection. Once the foreskin moves freely, routine rinsing usually removes it.

Forcing the foreskin back can cause pain, bleeding, or small tears. Healing after repeated injury may create scar tissue and make retraction more difficult.

After the foreskin becomes retractable, it is important to move it forward again after washing, urination, sex, or a medical examination. Leaving it trapped behind the glans can restrict blood flow and cause urgent swelling.

Why it matters for your health

Gentle cleaning removes sweat, urine residue, shed skin cells, and other material that can collect around the penis. It may also reduce odor and irritation.

More cleaning is not necessarily better. Fragranced soap, antiseptics, bubble bath, deodorant, and vigorous scrubbing can damage sensitive skin. Irritation from these products may look similar to an infection.

Foreskin care changes with development. For a baby or child whose foreskin does not retract, only the outside needs washing. Once it retracts comfortably, the person can learn to rinse underneath as part of ordinary bathing.

Cleaning does not prevent every foreskin problem. It also does not protect against sexually transmitted infections, or STIs. Condoms and appropriate STI testing remain important for sexually active people.

What can go wrong

Several separate conditions can affect the foreskin or glans. They are not caused by being uncircumcised alone.

Irritant or contact dermatitis is skin inflammation caused by contact with something irritating. Soap, fragranced products, urine, sweat, or repeated scrubbing may cause redness, itching, or

soreness.

Balanitis is inflammation of the glans. Balanoposthitis affects both the glans and foreskin. Causes can include irritation, infection, or a skin condition. A clinician may need to examine persistent redness, pain, swelling, odor, or discharge to identify the cause.

Phimosis means the foreskin cannot be pulled back. In children, non-retraction is often a normal developmental stage rather than true disease. A tight foreskin may need assessment if it becomes scarred, causes repeated inflammation, makes urination difficult, or remains troublesome later in development.

Paraphimosis occurs when a retracted foreskin becomes trapped behind the glans and cannot be moved forward. The glans may become painful, swollen, or darker in color. This is an emergency because the swelling can affect blood flow.

Urinary tract infections and STIs can also cause pain during urination, discharge, or other genital concerns. These require assessment rather than extra scrubbing.

Seek emergency care if:

Arrange prompt medical advice for fever with penile swelling, rapidly worsening inflammation, pus-like discharge, or a person who appears very unwell. Fever in a young infant needs urgent medical assessment.

A routine appointment is appropriate for repeated inflammation, a visible scarred ring, painful erections, ongoing difficulty retracting after puberty, persistent discharge, or a sore or skin change that does not heal.

- A retracted foreskin is trapped behind a swollen glans
- You or your child cannot pass urine
- The penis becomes severely swollen, very painful, or unusually dark
- A significant injury causes heavy or continuing bleeding

What you can do

For a baby or young child, wash the outside of the penis with warm water during normal bathing. Clean it like a finger. Do not use cotton swabs underneath the foreskin, and do not pull it back to check or clean beneath it.

When the foreskin starts to retract easily:

Plain water is usually enough under the foreskin. A mild, fragrance-free cleanser can be used on the surrounding external skin if it does not cause irritation. Avoid antiseptics, deodorants,

powders, and harsh scrubbing unless a clinician has recommended a specific product.

Children who can retract their own foreskin can be taught these steps. They should be given privacy and reminded to replace the foreskin afterward.

If irritation develops, note any new soap, laundry product, lubricant, or condom product used around the time it began. This record can help a clinician identify a possible trigger. Do not apply antibiotic like amoxicillin or doxycycline , antifungal like fluconazole or terbinafine , or steroid like prednisone or hydrocortisone creams unless advised, because different conditions can look alike.

There is nothing else to test or measure during routine care. If there is persistent pain, swelling, discharge, scarring, or difficulty urinating, ask whether an examination or testing for infection is appropriate.

- Gently pull it back only as far as comfortable.
- Rinse the exposed glans and inner foreskin with warm water.
- Gently dry the area.
- Move the foreskin forward to cover the glans again.

Common questions

How often should the penis be washed?

Gentle washing as part of a regular bath or shower is usually enough. Once the foreskin retracts, rinsing underneath should become part of that routine.

Should a parent retract a child's foreskin?

No. A foreskin should not be forced back. When it becomes comfortably retractable, the child can usually learn to clean underneath independently.

Is smegma a sign of poor hygiene?

Not necessarily. Smegma is made from normal shed skin cells and natural oils. Small collections are common while the foreskin is separating. Do not squeeze, scrape, or force the foreskin back to remove them.

Is ballooning during urination dangerous?

Some children have temporary puffing of the foreskin as urine passes. This can occur during normal development. Ask for a routine assessment if it is painful, the urine stream is weak, infections keep occurring, or the child struggles to urinate.

Can soap be used under the foreskin?

Plain warm water is often best. Soap can dry or irritate the sensitive inner surface. If a cleanser is used, choose a mild, fragrance-free product and stop if it causes discomfort.

What if the foreskin is tight?

Do not stretch it forcefully. A clinician can check whether the tightness is a normal developmental stage, irritation, or scarring. Treatments exist for some causes, but the right choice requires an assessment.

Should the foreskin be pulled back during sex?

It may retract naturally if this is comfortable. Pain, tearing, or repeated difficulty should not be ignored. A water-based or silicone-based lubricant may reduce friction, while condoms help lower STI risk. Afterward, make sure the foreskin has returned over the glans.

Sources

- NHS. How to keep a penis clean - Guidance on routine washing, foreskin retraction, and avoiding irritation
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- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Clinical Practice Guideline: The penis and foreskin - Clinical guidance on normal development, inflammation, phimosis, and paraphimosis
- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Kids Health Info: Penis and foreskin care - Family information on hygiene and when to seek care
- European Association of Urology. EAU Guidelines on Paediatric Urology - Specialty guidance covering foreskin development, phimosis, and paraphimosis