

Ritual vs Medical Circumcision in the Philippines

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Peter, 11 years old is often teased by his playmates. “*Supot!*” his playmates would mock him whenever they have a petty argument during their games. “*Supot*” is a Filipino term used to call uncircumcised males. Peter is embarrassed because he is not yet circumcised. His so-called friends know how sensitive he is about his “condition” and they use it against him whenever they get a chance. Peter feels vulnerable because his playmates are capable of targeting him where it hurts the most. He is anxious to be circumcised as soon as possible. He told his parents about his desire to undergo the procedure and they promised to make the necessary arrangements next summer vacation. Peter is not excited about the actual procedure. In fact, he is terrified just thinking about it but he knows that circumcision will put an end to the shame and mockery that he always gets from his playmates. He told himself, “No pain, no gain.”

In the Philippines, summer is famous for “tuli” or circumcision. Summer is a popular time for pre-adolescent and adolescent boys, usually aged 9-12 to get circumcised. The long school break gives the boys more than enough time to heal before going back to school.

Circumcision has become the norm for majority of Filipino children. Circumcision has become part of Filipino culture unlike in other countries where the procedure is considered optional.

Circumcision is said to mark the beginning of manhood. Parents are usually the ones who set up plans for their child’s circumcision. Boys who remain uncircumcised after their adolescent years become center of jokes and often ostracized by the society. Sometimes peer pressure makes a boy want to go through the procedure.

After circumcision, a lad usually experiences a boost in confidence and feels ready to face his peers and the rest of the world with a renewed sense of spirit.

Circumcision in simple terms

Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin of the head of the penis.

Purpose of circumcision

There are various reasons why circumcision is being practiced. Some of the most common reasons are:

- an adolescent male’s rite of passage
- part of culture or religious belief
- for personal hygiene

Ritual circumcision



In some provinces in the Philippines, circumcision is not performed by a physician; nor is it done within the four walls of a clinic. Circumcision is performed out in the open on small groups by an ordinary person with an expertise in the procedure. Despite lack of medical background, many parents entrust their pre-adolescent and adolescent children to their barrio's acclaimed "mangtutuli". The ritual circumcision is **traditionally performed** during summer, specifically during Black Saturday.

This kind of circumcision is sometimes favored by others because of lack of money to pay for a clinical procedure.

In some rural areas, traditional circumcision entails taking a dip in the nearest river. Some believe that this decreases the bleeding. The boy to be circumcised is also asked to chew on a handful of guava leaves.

In this kind of circumcision, there is no anesthesia to help control the pain. The pain is said to be a necessary part during the rite of passage. The boy is held down by his father or other relatives as the "mangtutuli" cuts the foreskin of the penis using a barber's blade (labaja) or "balisong" (fan-knife). A carved wooden instrument called "**lukaw**" (usually made from a branch of a guava tree) serves as a guide during the cutting of the foreskin. One end of the "lukaw" is driven to the ground while its other end is fitted in between the foreskin and the head of the penis. The boy is usually in a sitting position while straddling the wooden contraption.

A cry of pain fills the atmosphere as the foreskin is cut in one single blow. Some may think that it's a cruel thing to let a child go through such a painful experience while other parents think that it's just a normal part of becoming a man. The "mangtutuli" gives the lad a handful of guava leaves to chew on. The same mouthful of guava leaves is spit out and placed directly on the wound which is believed to help **healing and prevent infection**.

A piece of soft cloth is often wrapped around the penile head with a hole for the purpose of urination. The "mangtutuli" advises the parents to boil guava leaves and use the water extract to wash the wound on a daily basis. The dressing is also changed every day to prevent infection.

Medical circumcision

In urban areas in the Philippines, boys usually undergo medical circumcision because of better access to clinics and hospitals. Medical circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin of the penis. In infants, surgical procedure may be done using **surgical clamp techniques or a Plastibell** (special disposable plastic device). Circumcision is done by a physician or a trained and experienced medical practitioner in a clinic or hospital. The patient is given local anesthesia to prevent pain during the procedure.

Medical reasons for circumcision

- Hygiene is a number consideration behind circumcision. Uncircumcised males require more attention in cleaning the foreskin to avoid **harmful bacteria and other foreign microbes** from going inside the spout of the skin.
- Circumcision helps prevent **Phimosis** or the tightness of the foreskin that prevents the retraction of the foreskin over the glans.
- The procedure also helps prevent **Paraphimosis** or a condition in which the foreskin, once pulled back behind the glans experiences difficulty returning to its original position.
- According to Dr. Rodolfo Albornoz, Program Manager, Adolescent & Youth Health DOH, there are studies that claim **lesser incidence of HIV** among circumcised males.

Post circumcision care

Here are some **simple steps** to follow after circumcision:

- During the first day, it is advisable not to get the wound wet.
- Pain reliever may be taken to ease the pain.
- On the second day, the bandage should be removed. Use soap and warm water to gently clean the wound. It is advisable to wear loose fitting shorts or pants to avoid hitting the wound.
- The wound should be cleaned and bandage changed daily.
- The wound may take around one week up to 10 days to heal properly.

Myths about circumcision

- After circumcision, a boy will grow taller.
- A newly circumcised boy should avoid eating smelly foods in order to prevent allergies.
- A newly circumcised boy will experience an unusual type of swelling, commonly referred to as “kinakamatis” if the wound is exposed to girls.

The Department of Health (DOH) discourages the ritual type of circumcision. The DOH usually conducts free mass circumcision to encourage parents to choose a safer method of circumcision.

Photos: “Cheap mediaeval circumcision.” by Nate, c/o Flickr. Some Rights Reserved; Screenshot from kalanalaka.

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