

Pediatric Conditions

Foreskin Care and Problems

At birth, the foreskin (prepuce) is normally adhered to and covers the tip of the penis (glans) as a natural protection of the penis. This is called **physiologic phimosis**. During the following 5 – 7 years, the foreskin gradually loosens and retracts itself little by little. The biggest changes are due to the stretching of the foreskin that is caused by the normal erections during infancy and the maturation and thickening of skin on the penis and the prepuce. As new cells form and old cells are sloughed off underneath the skin, it may form a white or yellow ball. This is **smegma cyst** and is not a tumor or infection. This material will eventually become extruded, similar to how ear wax falls out on its own, and in the process helps separate the foreskin from the glans.

In general, the foreskin does not cause any problems. On the other hand, excessively forceful attempts to retract the foreskin before it is totally loose can cause the foreskin to be trapped behind the head of the penis, producing swelling and intense pain. This is called **paraphimosis** and needs immediate treatment by a physician to avoid strangulation of the tip of the penis. If skin tears during retraction, a dense scar may form and interfere with the natural retraction later. This is called **pathologic phimosis**. This can lead to foreskin ballooning during urination, infections of the foreskin (**balanoposthitis**), or urinary tract infections. Circumcision may be necessary to correct the problem.

Normal foreskin care

In general, foreskin requires minimal attention. The following suggestions can help maintain an acceptable hygiene.

- During the first year, only clean the outside of the foreskin. Do not attempt to retract.
- The smooth and partial retraction can begin during the first or second year of age. It can be done once a week during a bath. Do this by gently and slowly pushing the skin back towards the abdomen. This will cause the foreskin to stretch and widen.
- If part or all of the glans is exposed during the retraction process, it should be washed with water. Clear any whitish material (smegma) that is present. Smegma is the accumulation of dead cells that normally come off the glans and the lining of the foreskin and is not pus. Avoid rubbing or using hard soap on the glans and under the foreskin as this can cause irritation. After cleaning, always pull the foreskin forward, to its normal position, covering the glans.
- When your son is 5 to 6 years of age, teach him to retract his foreskin and clean under at least once a week to avoid the lack of hygiene and to prevent infections. During the first couple of years it will be necessary for you to remind them every once in a while.

Remember that any degree of foreskin retraction is normal. There should be no rush to accomplish total foreskin retraction. The retraction almost always completes itself by

puberty. While the foreskin retracts on its own, your son should clean under foreskin to prevent infections.

Contact your doctor immediately if:

- Foreskin is trapped behind the head of the penis
- Your son cannot urinate because of swollen foreskin
- Your son seems to be very ill from having severe redness and swelling of the foreskin and penis.