

Jewish Circumcision Resource Center Information Summary

1. Circumcision of male infants is not universal among American Jews. Some Jews in South America, Europe, and Israel also do not circumcise. For example, the circumcision rate among Swedish Jews is reported to be about 40%.
2. Jewish circumcision is a growing topic of debate in the Jewish community and has been questioned in dozens of articles appearing in such publications as Moment, Tikkun, Jewish News, Forward, Jewish Advocate, Jewish Monthly, Jerusalem Post, Jewish Journal, and Jewish Times. Two Israeli organizations publicly oppose circumcision (Israeli Association Against Genital Mutilation and Kahal Group).
3. Jewish circumcision has been challenged in earlier times. In the Hellenistic period (300 B.C.-100 A.D.) some Jews chose not to circumcise their sons. In the 1840s during the Reform movement in Germany, circumcision was opposed by Jewish parents, physicians, and leaders.
4. Originally only the tip of the foreskin was cut, called milah. This practice lasted about 2000 years. During the Hellenistic period, many young Jews concealed their circumcision by drawing their foreskins forward. The rabbis of the time decided to change the requirements of the procedure so that a circumcised male could not possibly be altered to appear uncircumcised. This was the start of periah, removing the entire foreskin. (more information on changing procedure)
5. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica, "any child born of a Jewish mother is a Jew, whether circumcised or not." This restrictive definition is based on Orthodox belief. Other Jews recognize that one can be Jewish based on the status of either parent and, of course, conversion.
6. The biggest threat to Jewish survival is assimilation. There is no evidence that circumcision slows it. Despite circumcision, about half of all Jews who married in recent years chose a non-Jewish spouse.
7. The religious origin of Jewish circumcision is in the Torah. It says that God told Abraham "every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17) as part of a covenant between God and the Jewish people. However, most Jews are unaware of this origin, and in a survey of American Jews, the large majority (87%) do not believe that the Torah is the actual word of God.
8. In actual practice, many Jews circumcise because of cultural conformity, not religious reasons. Based on a national survey of American Jews, "90 percent define being Jewish as being a member of a cultural or ethnic group." Most circumcisions of male infants of American Jewish parents are done in hospitals without any religious ritual.
9. Jewish circumcision has never had anything to do with health concerns.
10. Jewish law acknowledges the remote possibility of death resulting from the surgery and allows for exemptions when other children in the family have died from the effects of circumcision.
11. Ritual circumcisers (mohelim) usually use the same clamp devices as doctors. In fact, training programs for Reform and Conservative mohelim require a valid medical license for certification. Consequently, there is little reason to believe that circumcisions performed by mohelim are less painful for the infant.
12. Some Jewish parents who have observed their son's circumcision have described it as extremely distressing for them and have regretted their decision for years.
13. Maimonides, the renowned physician, philosopher, and rabbi, wrote, "Circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement, and sometimes lessens the natural enjoyment." Contemporary research, and reports from men circumcised as adults, confirm this.
14. Circumcision is inconsistent with significant Jewish laws and values. For example, the human body must not be altered or marked. The Torah also prohibits the causing of pain to any living creature. Since circumcision causes extreme pain, some Jews believe that circumcision is not ethical. Jewish values place ethical behavior above doctrine.
15. For those who want a ritual, a growing number are turning to alternative equivalent rituals for male and female infants. This is consistent with reforming Judaism to be more egalitarian.
16. Jewish boys who are not circumcised are accepted by others and have had bar mitzvahs.