

# Foreskin Problems

Most uncircumcised boys have no problems related to the intact foreskin—the skin covering the tip of the penis. In infants and toddlers, it is normal for the foreskin not to slide back over the end of the penis. In older boys, the foreskin may be too tight to slide back (phimosis), but this is usually not a serious problem. If the tight foreskin is forced over the head of the penis and cannot be pulled back, this may cause a serious condition called paraphimosis.

## What kinds of foreskin problems may occur?

*Phimosis* means tight foreskin. In this condition, the foreskin cannot easily be pulled over the head of the penis. This is normal in toddlers and infants. Usually, the foreskin becomes loose enough to be pulled back as your child gets older. In older boys, phimosis can make it difficult to clean the head of the penis. Occasionally it causes problems with urination.

*Balanoposthitis* refers to inflammation to the head of the penis and foreskin that results from irritation or infection. Infection can be either bacterial or yeast. Poor hygiene can be part of the problem.

Paraphimosis is a problem in which the foreskin gets pulled over the head of the penis and cannot be pulled back. This can cause problems with blood flow in the head of the penis, and there is a risk of permanent damage.

- ! • *Paraphimosis can be an emergency requiring immediate treatment.*

## What do they look like?

- *Phimosis.*
  - “Tight” foreskin that cannot easily be pulled back over the head of the penis.
  - This is normal in infants and young boys. Usually by age 3, the foreskin becomes loose enough to be pulled back easily.
  - Never force the foreskin back over the head of the penis. This actually increases the risk of problems with tight foreskin/phimosis.
  - Phimosis sometimes causes problems during urination. The foreskin may fill up like a balloon before the urine finally comes out. *If this occurs, see your doctor.*
  - In older boys, phimosis may cause pain when the penis is erect.
- *Balanoposthitis.*

- Redness, tenderness, or swelling of the foreskin or head of the penis.
- Pus or other fluid draining from the tip of the penis.
- May be pain with urination.
- *Paraphimosis.*
  - Tight foreskin pulled back over the head of the penis.
  - Head of the penis becomes swollen and very painful.
  - Paraphimosis requires immediate treatment to avoid damage to the head of the penis caused by problems with insufficient blood supply. *Call the doctor immediately.*

## What causes foreskin problems?

- Phimosis is usually a normal condition. However, it can occur as a result of infection or injury, including injury from forcing the foreskin back.
- Phimosis usually occurs in boys who are not circumcised. (Circumcision is a minor operation to remove the foreskin, usually performed in infant boys.)
- Infections usually result from poor hygiene. Your doctor can show you (or if he is older, your son) how to clean the uncircumcised penis properly. Push the foreskin back gently until you first feel resistance. Then cleanse the penis with a damp, soft cloth.
- Paraphimosis may occur when the tight foreskin is forced back. This sometimes happens when attempting to clean the head of the penis.

## Can foreskin problems be prevented?

- Circumcision, if properly performed, prevents phimosis and other foreskin problems.
- Never force the foreskin back over the head of the penis, especially in infants and young boys.
- Keep the genital area clean.

## How are foreskin problems treated?

- *Phimosis:*
  - In infants and boys younger than 3, a tight foreskin is normal. Never force the foreskin over the head of the penis. In most boys, the foreskin will become looser over time.
  - Phimosis generally needs treatment only when it is causing pain or problems with urination.

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- Your doctor may recommend using a steroid cream to loosen the foreskin. Apply the cream as prescribed. This gradually loosens the tight foreskin in most boys.
- If necessary, circumcision can be performed.
- *Balanoposthitis*:
  - Antibiotics may be needed if infection is present. The antibiotic used depends on the cause of the infection.
  - Your doctor may recommend antibiotic pills or cream. Steroid cream or ointment may also be used for the inflammation.
  - Circumcision is sometimes recommended if the problem occurs repeatedly.
- *Paraphimosis*:
  - *Paraphimosis can be a medical emergency.* Immediate treatment is needed to prevent permanent damage to the penis.



- In the emergency room, the doctor will take steps to put the foreskin back in its proper position. This is successful most of the time. If not, surgery may be needed.
- Swelling and tenderness of the penis may take a few days to clear up.
- The doctor will provide you, or your son, with instructions for keeping the penis clean.
- Your doctor may recommend a visit to a specialist (surgeon or urologist) for further evaluation. Circumcision may be recommended to prevent future problems with paraphimosis.



### **When should I call your office?**

Call our office whenever symptoms related to the foreskin develop, especially pain, tenderness, or swelling of the foreskin or head of the penis.