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The Uncut Story: A History of Circumcision

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Male circumcision is the practice of removing the foreskin from the penis. The foreskin is the “hood” covering the tip of the penis that, when the male is sexually aroused, folds back to show the head. When the foreskin is removed, the head of the penis is not covered even when the male is not sexually aroused. Circumcision is typically performed either because of religious reasons or to fit societal norms. It is usually done on babies.

There’s a bigger story to circumcision than the removal of the foreskin — that’s just the tip of the matter.

Uncircumcised men can always change their mind. That was the case with one Iowa State student.

Clark*, a junior, was uncircumcised until August 2016. Despite believing that most of his friends were circumcised, he says he wasn’t pressured in any way into having the procedure.

“For me, I kind of needed to because sex was very uncomfortable,” he says. “It wasn’t painful, but I thought it would be easier if I got cut.”

Clark first went and got checked out and cleared by a urologist who made sure he was fit for the procedure, verified that he was sure about his decision and explained the process to him.

After that, Clark was admitted as an outpatient to the hospital and underwent the surgery. He says it took thirty minutes — “if that.” However, recovery wasn’t such a breeze.

“The next day, after I had gotten off all the anesthesia and pain medicine and all that fun stuff, I was like, ‘This is the worst thing I’ve ever done,’ and ‘Why would I do that to myself?’ and was kind of regretting it. A lot,” he says.

Recovery for Clark took about a month. In that month, he recalls being unable to lay on his back, walking awkwardly, wearing a pair of scrub pants because regular pants were too tight, and that going to the bathroom was “not fun.”

“Stitches were not nice,” he adds, “There was a lot of bleeding, too.”

Even though it is a popular cosmetic surgery in United States, the practice of circumcision has religious roots. In the article “Circumcision as a Slave Mark,” Iowa State religious studies professor Dr. Hector Avalos theorizes that circumcision originated in Judaism and was a method of marking one as a slave to Yahweh, “the ultimate owner and master of the Hebrew people.”

Avalos acknowledges that this theory explains why the practice is performed voluntarily and cites that it is done in infancy because early followers of Judaism held the belief that one’s body healed better in the eighth day of life. [The number eight has a lot significance in Judaism.]
The Uncut Story:
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nobody talks about in the open and there’s probably
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approaching men that way is bound to get you some

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forms of violence on a global scale,” Avalos writes.

“If violence is defined as the act of modifying and/
or inflicting pain upon the human body in order
to express or impose power differentials, then
circumcision may be one of the most prevalent
forms of violence on a global scale,” Avalos writes.

Many sources stated that the practice took
hold in mainstream America after World
War II; it was believed that the procedure
would help reduce the numbers of STIs
and other infections that men contract.
It was also done because it was believed
to lower sexual desires in men because
removing the foreskin meant removing
most of the nerve endings on the penis and
therefore causing it to lose sensitivity.

“There is a slightly higher risk of STI
transmission with uncircumcised penises,”
says human sexuality professor Elizabeth
Shirtcliff. “Although, that can be avoided
through condom usage and making sure to
keep the penis clean with soap and water.”

Shirtcliff, who more commonly goes by
Birdie, states that there are no other
biological differences between one or
the other. “It was once believed that a
circumcised penis was more sensitive
than an uncircumcised penis [because
the foreskin wasn’t in the way], but that
does not turn out to be the case. A penis is
prettty sensitive either way, especially on

the corona [the flesh that joins the shaft
and head of the penis].”

The medical community is torn on their
views on the procedure, but the American
Medical Association has denounced the
procedure over the last couple of decades
as “medically unnecessary.” Testosterone
is produced and stored in the corona and
not the foreskin, meaning that men are
not affected hormonally by having one
or the other. Uncircumcised penises just
require a more strict hygienic routine with
regular cleaning under the foreskin to
prevent infection. Birdie believes that the
topic of circumcision and having one or the
other is something people shouldn’t be
embarrassed to discuss.

“I think, at the point in time that you are
interacting with someone at a genital level,
then you should know them well enough
and care about them deeply enough that
the subtle variations of a penis or labia
shouldn’t matter,” she says.

She adds, “Being comfortable with your body
isn’t easy sometimes, but it is an important
part of being a sexually healthy person to be
knowledgeable and comfortable with your body,
including your genitals.”

Despite the languish recovery process,
Clark says he hasn’t experienced any
discomfort and does not regret his decision
to have his penis circumcised.

“I think it was worth it. I would do it again.
Ten out of ten,” he laughs.