

How Americans Came to be Routinely Circumcised

Who were the first people to practice circumcision? When did it begin? And why was it begun? No one really knows. The answers are lost in antiquity. Theories abound, but no one can say with certainty when, where, or why male circumcision began.

It is not known whether the practice began with one group and then spread to others or if it developed independently among a number of different groups. But the fact that various circumcision styles are practiced by different groups suggests that the practice had more than one origin.

Artifacts 6,000 years old show that the practice was well established in Egypt long before it was adopted by the ancient Jews. This is confirmed by the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, which states, “It seems that Abraham did not start the practice of circumcision” (1).

Regardless of where it started, male circumcision is currently practiced by various peoples and countries of the world, primarily by the Muslims (historically, more often called Moslems) and Jews worldwide, some African countries, and the United States. And to a much lesser extent, Australia and Canada (where rates have been gradually declining and are presently estimated to be about 10 and 20 percent, respectively). Approximately 20% of the world’s males are circumcised.

Although Jews can trace the origin of their ritual to passages in the Old Testament, Moslems, on the other hand, practice it primarily as a cultural ritual, with religious overtones. Although circumcision has come down through Moslem culture to symbolize religious purity, the word "circumcision" does not appear anywhere in the Koran (the Moslem equivalent of the Christian Bible) (2). Still, male circumcision is a ritual strictly adhered to by the Moslems. In Moslem culture, circumcision is usually performed sometime between adolescence and marriage. It is often part of a village ceremony in which young men are initiated into manhood, their circumcisions also serving as a symbol of a "true believer" in Islam.

Religion is not a major factor in the circumcision rates of the United States, Canada, and Australia, which practice it primarily for its presumed medical benefits or simply because the father was circumcised and the parents feel the son should match.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE ADOPTS CIRCUMCISION AND EXPORTS IT TO NORTH AMERICA

Everyone familiar with the story of Robin Hood knows how King Richard's crusade to the Holy Land created grave problems for the people he left behind in England. But what people don't know is that the Crusades set in motion the forces that would eventually lead to the circumcision of millions of males in England, Canada, Australia, and the United States.

In the 12th century, King Richard, along with other European rulers, organized an army that invaded the Middle East in hopes of freeing the Christian Holy Lands from Moslem occupation. The more culturally advanced Moslems looked upon these intruding Europeans, who raided and plundered their land, as barbarians, and called them "uncircumcised dogs." For in the eyes of the Moslems, the Christian uncircumcised penis was an affront to Allah and Islamism (3). Captured Europeans were

routinely circumcised by force, and many a knight in shining armor returned to Mother England without his foreskin (4).

Over the next several hundred years, as England expanded its economic and colonial ambitions into other Moslem countries, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, and Indian Moghuls all had a turn at cutting off British foreskins. For example, 300 English workers at the Old London Company offices in Cossimbazar, India were stripped and publicly circumcised by the Moghul troops who captured the British outpost (5). On a different occasion, a Scottish officer and many of his subordinates were forcefully circumcised during an elaborate ceremony in which their foreskins were burned as an offering to Allah (6).

According to historian Allen Edwardes, after great battles, “the slashed prepuces [foreskins] of the Unbelievers, [were] heaped in mounds....in accordance with the rigid martial code of the Moghul Empire, the warrior rose in rank according to the number of foreskins he brought in from the field” (7).

As the British Empire continued to send soldiers, adventurers, and government clerks into Moslem lands, an increasing number of men returned home circumcised. Some, however, did not return because they bled to death. To prevent the tragic consequences of a poorly performed impromptu circumcision, some English companies began, as early as the mid-1600s, to have their representatives circumcised before sending them off to foreign lands. It was a lot safer to have it done at home than to risk the knives and swords of the overzealous Moslems. Thus began the first circumcisions of Englishmen by fellow Englishmen.

By the early 19th century, the circumcised penis had become fashionable among British aristocracy, who wore it proudly as a badge of honor—proof of having served the Motherland in foreign service. Gradually, this mark of distinction gained a prestigious recognition among the privileged upper class, and young squires of elite all-boy schools began to get circumcised to match their parents or peers.

Except for the upper classes, however, the majority of English males remained uncircumcised. But upon the publication (1891) of a paper by the president of the Royal College of Surgeons entitled, "On Circumcision as Preventive of Masturbation," an anti-masturbation frenzy swept through Britain and even working-class boys began to be routinely circumcised (8). This anti-masturbation mania soon invaded America.

Why would the foreskin be blamed as a cause of masturbation? Because, during urination, or when retracting it for cleaning purposes, a male has to handle the penis and pay attention to it. This extra handling and attention was blamed for an increased incidence of masturbation, and in the 1800s, the medical community was beginning to associate masturbation with a wide variety of purported ills. Reports like the following began to commonly appear in medical literature ascribing many harmful effects to masturbation:

One of the two men who indulged in excessive masturbation became insane; the other dried out his brain so prodigiously that it could be heard rattling in his skull.... The effects of masturbation range from impotence to epilepsy, and include 'consumption, blindness, imbecility, insanity, rheumatism, gonorrhea, priapism (painful continuous erection due to disease), tumors, constipation, hemorrhoids, female homosexuality, and finally lead to death' (9).

When anti-masturbation mania took possession of the medical psyche, the scientific practice of medicine was in its rudimentary stages of development. The causes, contagions, and cures for nearly all diseases were unknown. One of the prevailing British theories of illness was that "All disease could be reduced to one basic causal model, either the diminution or increase of nervous energy" (10). This theory was picked up by a famous American physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, who espoused that if nervous energy were the basis of all disease, then orgasm was a target to

control. In 1812, Dr. Rush wrote that overindulgence in sex or masturbation resulted in:

...seminal weakness, impotence, dysury, tabes dorsalis, pulmonary consumptions, dyspepsia, dimness of sight, vertigo, epilepsy, hypochondriasis, loss of memory, malangia, fatuity and death (11).

The above ideas seem recklessly crude and completely overblown compared to our present-day knowledge, but at the time, the purported destructive effects of masturbation were a serious issue. Dr. Rush's statements were picked up and persisted, in one form or another, well into the 20th Century. Among the leading champions of this theory interrelating sexuality and disease was Dr. Sylvester Graham, the developer of graham crackers, who wrote a book on the evils of excessive sexuality in which he added dozens of diseases to Dr. Rush's list, including disturbances of the stomach, heart, lungs, skin, and also of the brain, into which masturbation induced insanity, he claimed (12). Graham's book went through 10 editions from 1834-1848.

In 1855, an editorial in the *New Orleans Medical Journal* stated:

Neither the plague, nor war, nor small pox, nor a crowd of similar evils have resulted more disastrously for humanity, than the habit of masturbation: it is the destroying element of civilized society (13).

Another opponent of masturbation was John Kellogg, whose breakfast cereals are still well known. In 1882, he wrote that masturbation was a sin against nature, causing "urethral irritation, inflammation of the urethra, enlarged prostate, bladder and kidney infection, priapism, piles and prolapse of the rectum, atrophy of the testes, varicocele, nocturnal emissions and general exhaustion" (14). Kellogg also noted that a masturbator could be

detected by 38 suspicious signs, including: changes in disposition, sleeplessness, bashfulness, round shoulders, lack of breast development (in females), use of tobacco, acne, biting of the fingernails, and the use of obscene words (15). Masturbation and its telltale signs understandably evoked fear among parents, who did not want their children to suffer the horrible physical and emotional consequences of this evil.

Another opponent, Dr. P. C. Remondino, published a detailed book, in 1891, taking the evils of the male sex organ one step further, blaming the foreskin itself for various undesirable traits and illnesses. In his medical opinion:

The prepuce [foreskin] seems to exercise a malign influence in the most distant and apparently unconnected manner; where like some of the evil genii or spirits in the Arabian tales, it can reach from afar the object of its malignity, striking him down unawares in the most unaccountable manner; making him a victim to all manner of ills, sufferings and tribulations; unfitting him for marriage or the cares of business; making him miserable and an object of continual scolding in childhood, through its worriments and nocturnal enuresis, later on beginning to affect him with all kinds of physical distortions and ailments, nocturnal pollutions, and other conditions calculated to weaken him physically, mentally, and morally, to land him, perchance, in the jail, or even in a lunatic asylum. Man's whole life is subject to the capricious dispensations and whims of this Job's-comforts-dispensing enemy of man (16).

In 1903, Mary R. Melendy wrote *The Ideal Women—For Maidens, Wives And Mothers*, which stated:

It (self-abuse) [masturbation] lays the foundation for consumption, paralysis and heart disease. It weakens the memory, makes a boy careless, negligent and listless. It even makes many lose their minds: others, when grown, commit

suicide. How often mothers see their little boys handling themselves, and let it pass, because they think the boy will outgrow the habit, and do not realize the strong hold it has upon them! I say to you, who love your boys—‘Watch!’ Don’t think it does no harm to your boy because he does not suffer now, for the effects of this vice come on so slowly that the victim is often very near death before you realize that he has done himself harm. It is worthy of note that many eminent physicians now advocate the custom of circumcision, claiming that the removal of a little of the foreskin induces cleanliness, thus preventing the irritation and excitement which come from the gathering of the whitish matter under the foreskin at the beginning of the glans. This irritation being removed, the boy is less apt to tamper with his sexual organs. The argument seems a good one, especially when we call to mind the high physical state of those people who have practiced the custom. Happy is the mother who can feel she has done her duty, in this direction, while her boy is still a child (17).

With typical writings like the above, the early 20th century found the American medical establishment in general agreement that masturbation and hypersexuality had devastating and damaging effects on one’s physical and emotional well-being.

The evil foreskin, and its supposed propensity toward masturbation, had to be eliminated, according to the belief of the time. This dangerous activity had to be brought under control—for one’s own good! Thus, routine circumcision began its infiltration into American society and subsequently escalated throughout most of the 20th century.

Any custom that infiltrates a society may continue on after the original reasons for its inception have been forgotten. In America, circumcision continued to be practiced long after the medical profession and the general public had abandoned, even forgotten, its original purpose, which was to thwart the supposed evil effects of masturbation. Once circumcision became accepted,

a variety of straw medical benefits were attributed to its practice during the 1900s, thereby perpetuating its further acceptance and continuance.

Although circumcision never gained universal acceptance in the United States, it persisted and gradually picked up momentum, for two reasons. Firstly, hospital births became increasingly common, and the medical profession in these situations began doing routine circumcisions “for the child’s own good.” Secondly, World Wars I and II brought with them an epidemic of venereal disease. Taking the advice of their British counterparts, who associated VD with the foreskin, American military doctors presumed that soldiers without foreskins were less likely to contract venereal disease. Thus began the “unofficial” campaign of the United States Armed Forces to circumcise the troops “for health and cleanliness” reasons. This policy of “short-arm” inspections followed by circumcisions became routine throughout the military and did not abate until the human rights of GI’s were finally given some recognition during the Vietnam Conflict. Even so, many American soldiers who still had foreskins were routinely circumcised if they picked up any “problems” from the “girls” in town. By 1970, the circumcision rate had risen to an estimated 80%, mainly because of the greater number of hospital births. This, combined with the military’s policy of circumcising for “health and hygiene” reasons, left the great majority of American men without foreskins. The rate continued to rise until 1980, when circumcision was at its peak, estimated at 85%.

CIRCUMCISION RATE

How many men in America are circumcised? This question cannot be easily answered. Exact circumcision rates are impossible to determine because hospitals apparently considered circumcision so routine and so trivial they usually did not enter such a “routine” procedure in the records. In addition, if a child was circumcised later in the doctor’s office, this very likely went unreported. However, even though there is a lack of precise

national data, the conservatively estimated rates of infant male circumcision in the United States show a steady increase from 1870-1980, after which it began to decline (see Figure 14-1) and is presently (1998) estimated at 60% (20). This decline was primarily brought about by the publication of books like *Birth Without Violence*, by Dr. Frederick Leboyer (1976), which had an impact on the psyche of hospital maternity wards and on the greater number of women returning to home births.

This, then, is where the beginning of the Foreskin Restoration Revolution now finds us, with the majority of the American male

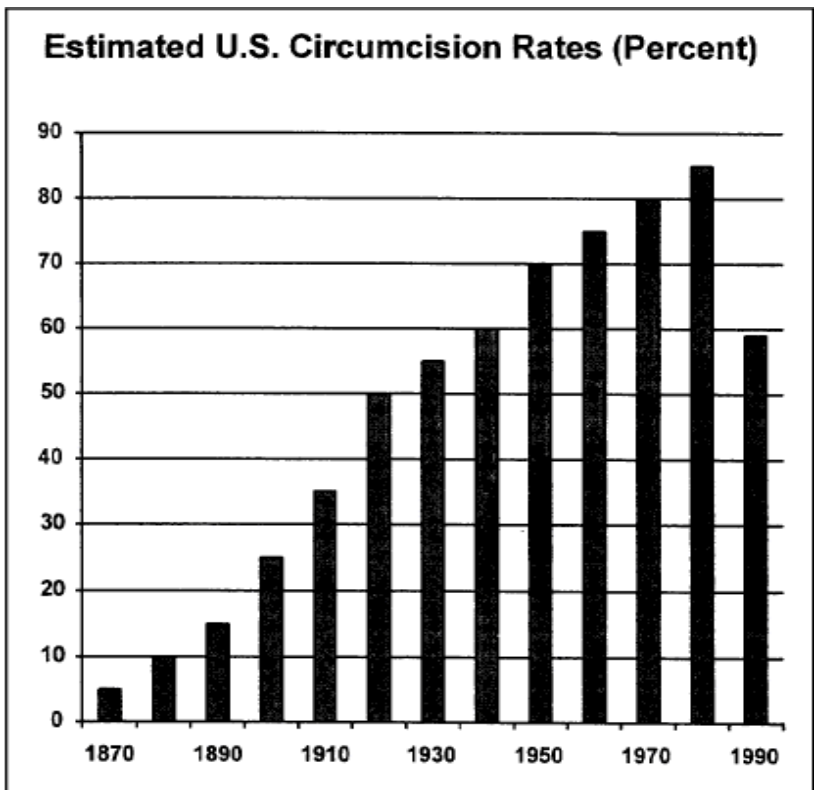


Figure 14-1. Estimated percentage of males circumcised from 1870-1980, according to Wallerstein (18). Estimate for 1990, source NOCIRC (19).

population circumcised. Nevertheless, I believe this is about to be reversed, and that America is on the eve of becoming a non-circumcising country. Soon, the circumcision rate of infant males in America will drop to near zero percent, and countless men will be restoring their foreskins. As you will recall, England was at one time obsessed with circumcision, and yet in the late 1940s, as a result of information released favoring non-circumcision, England's rate plummeted, almost "overnight," to less than 1 percent. The changeover in America will undoubtedly be just as sudden and complete.