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History Of Circumcision From The Earliest Times To The Present

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A Journey Through Time: The History of Circumcision From the Earliest Times to the Present

The practice of circumcision is one of the oldest known surgical procedures in human history, predating recorded history by thousands of years. Its journey from ancient ritual to modern medical debate is a fascinating story that touches on religion, culture, medicine, and ethics. Understanding the history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present offers insight into how human societies have grappled with tradition, health, and bodily autonomy across millennia.

Origins in Prehistory and Antiquity

The earliest evidence of circumcision comes from ancient Egypt. Tomb paintings and mummified remains dating back to at least 2400 BCE clearly depict the procedure. Egyptian hieroglyphs show a distinct word for circumcised men, and the practice was closely tied to ideas of purity, cleanliness, and social status. For the Egyptians, circumcision was likely a rite of passage into adulthood and a marker of membership in the priestly or elite classes.

Interestingly, the history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present reveals that the procedure arose independently in several different cultures. Beyond Egypt, ancient Semitic peoples, including the Phoenicians and Canaanites, also practiced circumcision. In West Africa, certain ethnic groups have traditions of circumcision that date back millennia, often as part of elaborate initiation ceremonies marking the transition from boyhood to manhood.

In the ancient Near East, circumcision was relatively rare among neighboring cultures. The Greeks and Romans famously viewed the practice with disdain, associating it with the peoples they considered barbaric. For them, the exposed glans was a sign of civilization, and they often went to great lengths to restore a prepuce through a procedure known as epispasm, in which men would stretch the remaining skin forward to mimic an uncircumcised appearance, especially when participating in public baths or athletic competitions.

Religious Codification: Judaism and the Covenant

Perhaps the most significant moment in the history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present was its adoption as a central religious commandment in Judaism. According to the Book of Genesis, God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and all male members of his household as a sign of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people. This event, traditionally dated to around 1800 BCE, transformed circumcision from a cultural practice into a divine mandate.

Jewish circumcision, known as *brit milah*, is performed on the eighth day after birth, even if that day falls on the Sabbath or a holiday. The procedure is accompanied by a ceremony that includes blessings, naming the child,

and a celebratory meal. For millennia, this practice has served as a powerful marker of Jewish identity, separating the Jewish people from their neighbors and reinforcing communal bonds across generations of diaspora.

The importance of circumcision in Judaism cannot be overstated. During periods of persecution, such as the Seleucid Empire under Antiochus IV or later under various Christian and Islamic rulers, the prohibition or forced abandonment of circumcision was seen as an existential threat. Conversely, Jewish communities often risked severe punishment to maintain the practice, viewing it as non-negotiable.

The Rise of Christianity and the Decline of Circumcision

An important chapter in the history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present involves the emergence of Christianity. The early Christian church faced a critical debate: would converts to Christianity need to follow Jewish law, including circumcision? The Apostle Paul argued forcefully against this requirement, stating that faith in Christ, not adherence to the Mosaic law, was what mattered. This decision, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters, effectively removed circumcision from Christian practice.

For the next 1,800 years, circumcision remained almost exclusively a Jewish practice in the Western world. Occasionally, it appeared in Christian contexts as a medical treatment for specific conditions like phimosis or paraphimosis, but it was never routine. In the Islamic world, however, circumcision became an important religious practice, though it is not explicitly mentioned in the Quran. By the early medieval period, most Muslim men were circumcised, often between ages seven and thirteen, as a marker of religious identity and cleanliness.

Medicalization in the 19th Century

Perhaps the most dramatic shift in the history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present occurred in the 19th century. Around the 1870s, a wave of medical enthusiasm for circumcision swept through the English-speaking world, particularly in Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. This movement was driven by several converging factors.

First, the germ theory of disease, championed by Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch, led to a heightened concern about hygiene. The Victorian obsession with cleanliness and purity made the foreskin seem unsanitary and prone to harboring smegma, which was incorrectly believed to cause various diseases. Second, the theory of reflex neurosis suggested that irritation of the foreskin could cause a wide range of conditions, including epilepsy, paralysis, blindness, and mental illness. These ideas, though entirely without scientific basis, were widely accepted in medical circles.

Third, the rise of masturbation phobia in the Victorian era played a significant role. Circumcision was promoted as a cure for what was then called self-abuse, which was believed to cause everything from insanity to tuberculosis. Lewis Sayre, a prominent American physician and president of the American Medical Association, became a vocal advocate for circumcision as a treatment for paralysis and other nervous conditions, lending considerable legitimacy to the practice.

By the early 20th century, circumcision had become routine for newborn boys in many English-speaking hospitals. The procedure was increasingly performed not for religious reasons, but as a preventive health measure. Notably, this trend did not occur in continental Europe, Latin America, or most of Asia, where circumcision remained rare except among specific religious groups.

The 20th Century: Routine Neonatal Circumcision

The mid-20th century saw the peak of routine neonatal circumcision in the United States. By the 1960s and 1970s, approximately 80 to 90 percent of newborn American boys were circumcised. This was driven by a combination of medical endorsement, hospital routines, and social pressure. Many parents believed that circumcision was necessary for hygiene and health, and that an uncircumcised son would feel abnormal among his peers.

During this period, several medical claims were made to justify routine circumcision. It was said to prevent penile cancer, reduce the risk of urinary tract infections, prevent phimosis, and reduce the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued statements in 1971 and 1975 stating that there was no absolute medical indication for routine circumcision, yet the practice continued at high rates.

The history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present also includes important developments in other parts of the world. In South Korea and the Philippines, circumcision became widespread during the 20th century, often as a result of American cultural influence and military presence. In South Korea today, the circumcision rate among adult men is among the highest in the world, despite the absence of religious or traditional roots for the practice.

Contemporary Controversies and Debates

The 21st century has brought renewed scrutiny to circumcision. Beginning in the 1990s, a growing movement of intactivists began questioning the ethics and necessity of routine infant circumcision. These critics argue that circumcision is a violation of bodily autonomy, that it removes healthy functional tissue, that it causes unnecessary pain and risk, and that the medical benefits do not justify routine performance on infants who cannot consent.

At the same time, medical evidence has continued to accumulate. Studies have shown that circumcision reduces the risk of HIV transmission by approximately 50 to 60 percent, leading the World Health Organization and UNAIDS to recommend voluntary medical male circumcision as part of HIV prevention programs in high-prevalence countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Other studies have shown reductions in the risk of HPV, herpes, syphilis, and penile cancer, though the absolute risk reductions are modest.

Current medical organizations have nuanced positions. The American Academy of Pediatrics stated in 2012 that the health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks, but that the benefits are not great enough to recommend universal routine circumcision. The AAP concluded that parents should make an informed decision based on their cultural, religious, and personal preferences. In contrast, the Royal Dutch Medical Association and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians have taken more cautious positions, emphasizing the non-therapeutic nature of infant circumcision and the importance of consent.

Global Variation in the Present Day

Today, the history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present continues to evolve. Globally, approximately 38 percent of males are circumcised, making it one of the most common surgical procedures in the world. However, this figure masks enormous variation.

In the United States, the circumcision rate has declined from its peak but remains around 55 to 60 percent for newborns, with significant regional and demographic variation. In Canada, rates are lower, around 30 to 40 percent. In the United Kingdom and continental Europe, rates are very low, typically below 10 percent except among Muslim and Jewish communities. In Africa, rates vary widely, with some countries having near-universal circumcision and others very low rates. In the Middle East and Central Asia, Muslim majority populations mean that circumcision is nearly universal. In East Asia, South Asia, and Latin America, circumcision is uncommon outside of specific religious communities.

The practice also varies by ethnicity and socioeconomic status within countries. In the United States, for example, circumcision is more common among white, higher-income families, while rates are lower among Hispanic and Asian American populations. Access to circumcision can also be affected by insurance coverage and state Medicaid policies.

Ethical and Legal Dimensions

One of the most contentious aspects in the current chapter of the history of circumcision from the earliest times

to the present is the ethical debate. Critics argue that performing a non-essential, permanent, and irreversible procedure on a non-consenting infant violates fundamental medical ethics. They draw parallels to female genital mutilation, though the comparison is hotly debated given the vast differences in health consequences and cultural contexts.

Some European countries have considered or enacted restrictions on non-medical circumcision. In 2012, a German court ruled that circumcision for religious reasons constituted bodily harm, though the German parliament later passed a law explicitly permitting the practice. In Iceland, a 2018 proposed law to ban non-medical circumcision for boys under 18 sparked international debate, though it did not pass. In Scandinavia, medical organizations have called for an age minimum for elective circumcision, typically 15 or 16 years, so that the individual can make his own decision.

Proponents of religious circumcision argue that the practice is protected by religious freedom, that parents have the right to raise their children according to their beliefs, and that the procedure is safe when performed by trained practitioners. They note that millions of boys have undergone circumcision throughout history with generally good outcomes, and that the medical benefits provide additional justification.

Conclusion: An Ancient Practice in a Modern World

The history of circumcision from the earliest times to the present reveals a practice that has been remarkably persistent across human cultures. From ancient Egyptian priests to Jewish patriarchs, from Victorian doctors to modern public health officials, circumcision has been imbued with meaning, whether religious, cultural, or medical. It has been a sign of covenant, a mark of purity, a preventive health measure, and a subject of intense debate.

Today, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Medical evidence continues to accumulate, ethical frameworks continue to evolve, and cultural norms continue to shift. What remains constant is the deep significance that this small surgical procedure holds for individuals, families, and communities. As we look to the future, the conversation around circumcision will likely continue to balance respect for tradition, respect for bodily autonomy, and respect for scientific evidence. Understanding its long and complex history is essential for anyone seeking to make an informed decision or to participate thoughtfully in this ongoing global dialogue.

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