



Care of the Normal Prepuce

What is the foreskin (prepuce)?

The 'prepuce' is the medical name for the layer of folded skin that usually lies over the glans (head of the penis). It is also called the 'foreskin'.

The prepuce is a normal part of the penis. It acts to protect the sensitive skin on the glans and the delicate tissue around the urethral meatus (urinary opening).

During development, the prepuce is attached to the glans. That is, the inner layer of the foreskin is stuck to the glans by filmy adhesions. These adhesions will begin separate from the glans over time. In some boys, this process will start before birth. The rate of separation will be different for different boys, even in the same family. Separation speed is not related to genetics or environmental factors.

In addition to the adhesions between prepuce and glans, other factors act to prevent the foreskin from rolling back easily in most young boys. Strong collagen fibres narrow the area of the foreskin fold. This is called the 'preputial ring'. It can be seen as a ring of whitened skin if foreskin retraction is attempted. Its purpose is to prevent accidental exposure of the delicate glans, even once the adhesions have separated. This ring softens and stretches with the normal hormonal influences of early puberty.

What is it for?

The early purpose of the prepuce is to protect the glans from injury. It protects the delicate tissue around the urethral meatus from abrasion or rubbing on nappies or underpants.

In adulthood, the prepuce has many sensory receptors. These contribute to sensation and sexual satisfaction.

What is normal?

At birth the prepuce is usually non-retractable (can't be pulled back). It usually remains this way for some time.

In many boys the prepuce will begin retract in early childhood (around 3-4 years of age). In some boys, it does not become retractable until close to puberty. In 99% of boys, the prepuce will be retractable by puberty.

As the two layers of skin are separating there may be a build up of small lumps of skin cells. These are yellow/white in colour and may be seen through the skin, or coming out the opening. This is called smegma. It is normal and not an infection.

In some boys the prepuce will balloon on voiding. As long the stream is reasonable, this is not a usually problem.

How do I look after it?

The prepuce (foreskin) needs NO special care, other than the same attention given to the rest of the body.

Hygiene in young boys DOES NOT require retraction of the prepuce (foreskin). Once the boy is old enough, he can be taught to retract his own prepuce for cleaning, when it allows.

Forcible retraction will cause splitting of the preputial ring, with pain and scarring.

When do I need to seek help?

The shape of the prepuce seems incomplete

The prepuce is red, swollen or seems painful

The prepuce has been pulled back and is now in a tight ring around the glans, unable to be returned.