

Easing the Pain of Circumcision

FEW MEDICAL PROCEDURES are as controversial as infant circumcision. But often lost in the debate is the issue of pain control. The American Academy of Pediatrics, while refraining from taking a stand for or against the procedure, does say that **pain relief for circumcision is essential**. There are safe and effective methods, but surprisingly, doctors don't always use them. Parents who choose circumcision need to familiarize themselves with the options and find a doctor who's up to speed on them.

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Until recently, the conventional medical wisdom was that newborns didn't feel pain, and circumcisions and other procedures were routinely performed without anesthesia. But research has shown that circumcision does cause pain, as measured by heart and respiratory rates, stress hormone levels, and crying and irritability. And the effects seem to be lasting: Babies circumcised without pain control respond more strongly to shots several months later than those who were given relief or weren't circumcised.

Studies show that the most effective way to reduce pain is a method known as ring block. It involves an injection of the anesthetic lidocaine around the penis. A slightly less-effective variation on this, called dorsal nerve block, requires two injections. Though both are considered safe, they can cause minor bruising and bleeding. Some doctors don't use either because the measures prolong the procedure. There's also concern the injections may cause as much pain as circumcision, but with proper technique it appears to be minimal.

Another option is EMLA cream, which numbs the skin. It reduces pain somewhat, though it's less effective than nerve



Tim Foley

blocks. The cream has to be applied 60 to 90 minutes before the procedure. Experts say it's best used in combination with other approaches. The same is true for sugar, which is thought to act as a narcotic in infants. Sugar water placed on the tongue has been found to provide some relief, especially if it's administered along with a pacifier.

Many doctors also use acetaminophen (Tylenol), but studies show it's not effective in relieving pain during circumcision. However, it may help afterward.

Experts say other measures, such as special padded chairs, can make the procedure less traumatic by keeping the infant comfortable. Ideally, parents should be present to cuddle the child as soon as surgery is over.

Circumcisions are typically done by obstetricians, pediatricians or family physicians. Jewish ritual circumcisions are performed by an official known as a mohel, who in some cases is a doctor. When choosing a practitioner, ask about his or her training and experience with various forms of pain control. Beware of those who insist that little or no relief is necessary because they perform the procedure so quickly. While a skilled practitioner can indeed minimize how long the pain lasts, research shows it can still be intense.

—With reporting by John M. Gunn

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