

# Foreskin problems

Reviewed by SickKids Staff | Last updated: May 16th 2019

Learn how to treat common foreskin problems, such as foreskin infection and accidental injury, and when to see a doctor.

## Key points

- Adhesions can form along the tip of the penis (glans), as the foreskin naturally separates from it. These are normal, require no treatment and go away on their own.
- Pus-like clumps called smegma can sometimes form as the foreskin naturally retracts. This is normal, requires no treatment and goes away on its own.
- Zipper injuries are common and require emergency treatment.
- In babies, a hair or thread may tightly twist around the penis, interfering with blood flow (hair tourniquet). This is serious and requires emergency treatment.
- Some children may forget to unretract their foreskin, causing it to form a painful, tight ring around the penis (paraphimosis). Using anaesthetic cream and pain medicine, a doctor can help push the foreskin to its original position.
- If your child experiences bleeding, irritation or white scarring of the foreskin, take them to see a doctor.

The penis is attached to a sheath of skin called the foreskin.

Some children may develop foreskin problems. Many of these issues either go away on their own or with the help of prescription medicine. Proper [foreskin care](#) is the best way to prevent many of these issues.

Other foreskin problems, such as an accidental injury are more serious. These types of issues need treatment right away.

## Adhesions and smegma

As a child gets older, the foreskin naturally separates from the head of the penis (glans). As this happens, the following may occur.

- Parts of the foreskin may remain attached (adhesions). This is normal and does not need any treatment. The foreskin fully separates by the time a child reaches puberty. Until then, there may be temporary soreness or pain while urinating. This usually goes away after a day or two.
- The foreskin naturally sheds, leaving small white or yellow clumps behind. These clumps are called smegma and may look like pus. The smegma eventually goes away on its own. There is no need for treatment.

## Balanitis

Balanitis is an infection which may cause the foreskin to become red, swollen and itchy. You may also notice a build-up of fluid and your child may experience pain while urinating. Proper foreskin care can prevent balanitis.

### Treating balanitis

If the balanitis is mild, your child's doctor may prescribe an antifungal cream, such as nystatin, clotrimazole or miconazole. If the foreskin infection is severe or keeps coming back, circumcision may be an option once the redness and swelling go away. Talk to your child's doctor to learn more. Good hygiene can also help prevent balanitis from coming back.

## Bacterial infection

If there is a cut or sore on the foreskin, bacteria can enter the skin and cause an infection. The bacteria can quickly spread along the entire foreskin. This can cause a bacterial infection called balanoposthitis. The penis and foreskin swell, become red and feel painful and very sensitive to the touch.

### Treating bacterial infection in the foreskin

If your child has developed a bacterial infection, talk to your doctor about treatment. In most cases, bacterial infection inside the foreskin or penis can be treated using either:

- antibiotics by mouth or
- topical antibiotics (antibiotic creams for the skin)

Your child's doctor may prescribe oral and topical antibiotics together.

In adolescents, other conditions may cause an infection. If your teen develops an infection or inflammation on their penis or foreskin, they should see a doctor.

To ease pain or discomfort, your child can sit in a warm bath with added bath salts (do not use bubble baths or perfumed soaps). They can also take pain medicine such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen. If your child develops a fever, they should see a doctor.

## Zipper injury

Your child may accidentally injure their foreskin by getting it caught in the teeth of a zipper. Aside from being very painful, a zipper injury may damage the tip of the tube inside the penis through which urine flows, called the urethral meatus.

If a zipper injury happens, take your child to the emergency department right away. Trying to remove skin trapped in a stuck zipper may cause more injury. Leave it alone or cut the clothing around the zipper to make it easier to take them to the hospital.

### Treating a zipper injury

Before detaching the zipper from the penis, your child's doctor may give your child some pain medicine. The doctor may inject a small amount of anaesthetic medicine at the base of the penis to numb it for a short time.

## Hair tourniquet

In babies, a hair or thread may tightly twist around the penis, interfering with blood flow. This is called a hair tourniquet.

The hair or thread may appear as a thin line around the penis, and the affected area usually swells and reddens. Sometimes the hair or thread may be very difficult to see. If you notice swelling, discoloration or redness of the penis and suspect a hair tourniquet, take your baby to the hospital right away. If it is not dealt with right away, a hair tourniquet can damage nerves or blood vessels.

### Treating a hair tourniquet

Your doctor will try to remove the tourniquet by applying a hair removal cream to the area. They may consult a urologist if the hair is deeply embedded in the skin. More serious cases may require surgery.

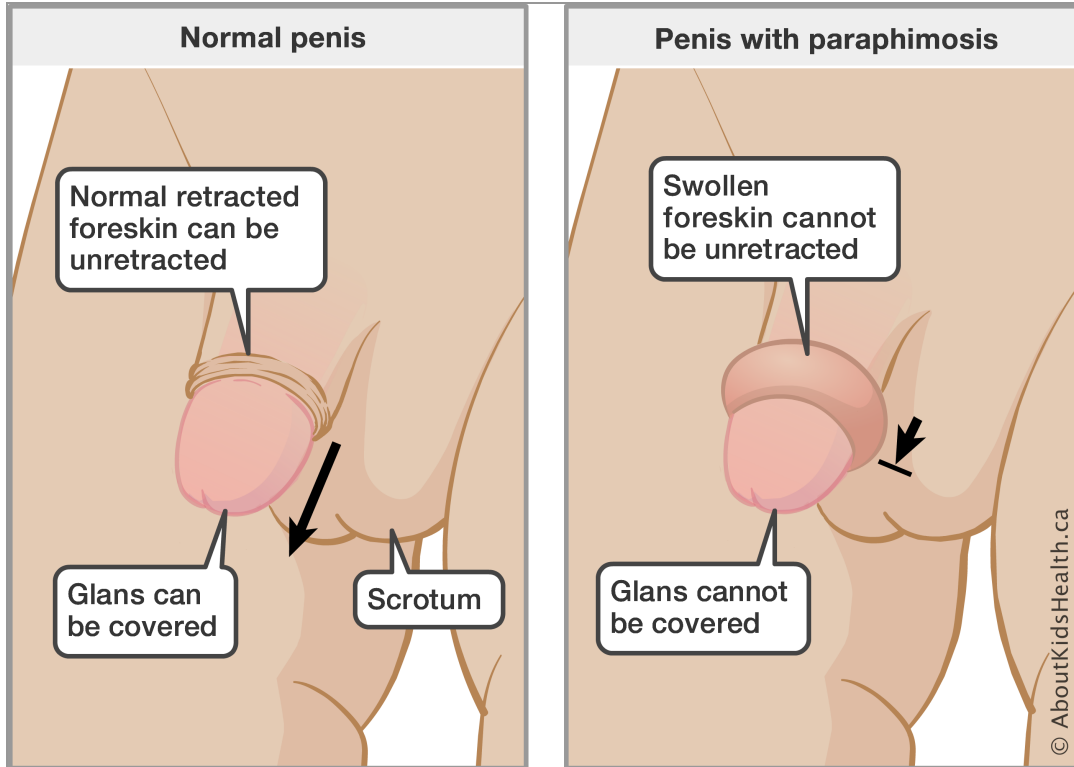
## Paraphimosis

As a child gets older, their foreskin loosens and they are able to pull back (retract) the foreskin. They can also push the foreskin back to its original position (unretract), covering the head of the

penis (glans).

Sometimes, a child may forget to unretract their foreskin. As a result, it becomes a tight band around the penis shaft. This is a condition called paraphimosis, which causes swelling and pain. Fluid can also build up around the area, causing further swelling.

### Paraphimosis



The penis is covered by a ring of tissue called the foreskin. In a normal penis, the foreskin is loose and retractable to show the glans (head of the penis). In a penis with paraphimosis, the foreskin is so swollen and tight around the shaft that it cannot be unretracted to cover the glans.

### Treating paraphimosis

If your child develops paraphimosis, take them to the doctor or an emergency department right away. Paraphimosis rarely requires surgery, but only a doctor should unretract the foreskin.

Before starting, the doctor will apply an anaesthetic cream. They may also prescribe pain medicine to relieve any discomfort. As the swelling reduces, the doctor will gently unretract the foreskin. Most children will need pain management or even sedation for this procedure.

### Phimosis

A related condition, called phimosis, occurs when children are unable to retract the foreskin. In newborns, the foreskin is usually not retractable. As your child gets older, the foreskin will slowly become easier to retract. The foreskin is usually retractable by late childhood or early adulthood. Children who are not experiencing any discomfort or symptoms do not need to be seen by a doctor, even if they cannot fully retract their foreskin.

Sometimes, children are unable to retract their foreskin due to scarring from a previous infection, trauma or inflammation. In these cases, your child should see a doctor.

Your child should also see a doctor if they experience:

- irritation or bleeding at the tip of the foreskin
- a ring of white scarring at the tip of the foreskin
- severe ballooning of the foreskin when urinating, requiring pressure to push the urine out (If your child has ballooning of the foreskin while urinating that resolves on its own, they do not need to be seen by a doctor)
- recurrent foreskin infections that require antibiotic treatment

For information on treating phimosis, please visit the Health A-Z page on [Phimosis](#).

Please visit [AboutKidsHealth.ca](#) for more child health information.

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