

What the foreskin is

The foreskin (also called the prepuce) is a fold of skin that covers and protects the tip of the penis (the glans). Everyone is born with a foreskin unless they were circumcised. There's a lot of normal variation in how it looks and how it works.

What the foreskin does

- Protects the glans from friction and drying out.
- Contains nerves and sensitive tissue that can add to sexual sensation.
- Can move back and forth over the glans, which happens more as someone goes through puberty.

Normal development and what to expect at 16

When boys are babies, the foreskin is usually fused (stuck) to the glans. Over childhood and puberty the skin normally separates so the foreskin can be pulled back (retracted). For some people separation happens early; for others it happens during the teenage years. At 16 it may be fully retractable, only partly retractable, or still non-retractable — all can be normal as long as there's no pain, swelling, or problems urinating.

How to clean and care for the foreskin

1. **If the foreskin is not retractable:** Do not force it back. Clean the outside of the penis with warm water and mild soap during showering. Forcing retraction can cause pain, tears, or scarring.
2. **If the foreskin is retractable:**
 - Gently pull the foreskin back to expose the glans.
 - Rinse the area under the foreskin with warm water. Mild, unscented soap can be used on the shaft but avoid getting strong soaps under the foreskin because they can irritate.
 - Dry gently and roll the foreskin back over the glans.
3. Do this regularly (daily is usual). It's not necessary to scrub—gentle cleaning is enough.
4. Smegma (a whitish substance) can build up under the foreskin; it's normal if washed away regularly. If it smells strongly, looks unusual, or is associated with pain, see a clinician.

Common problems to know about

- **Phimosis:** A tight foreskin that can't be pulled back. In children it's often physiological (normal) and improves on its own. In teens and adults it can cause pain or problems with hygiene. Mild cases are often treated with steroid creams and gentle stretching under medical guidance.
- **Paraphimosis:** An emergency when the foreskin is pushed back and can't be returned to its normal position, causing painful swelling and reduced blood flow. If this happens, seek urgent medical care.
- **Balanitis:** Inflammation or infection of the glans (sometimes of the foreskin too). Symptoms include redness, pain, swelling, discharge, or a bad smell. It's usually treatable with improved hygiene, topical medicines, or antibiotics if an infection is present.

Circumcision — what's different

Circumcision is a surgical removal of the foreskin. People who are circumcised do not have a foreskin and must clean the glans directly. Whether to be circumcised or not is a personal, cultural, or medical

decision. There are pros and cons; if you're curious about whether circumcision would be useful for you, talk with a doctor.

Sexual activity and the foreskin

- The foreskin is a normal part of sexual anatomy. It can be sensitive, and experiences vary from person to person.
- Use condoms to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy. Proper condom use is important whether or not you have a foreskin.
- If the foreskin is tight and causes pain with erections or sex, tell a healthcare provider — treatments are available.

When to see a doctor

- Persistent pain or bleeding
- Difficulty urinating or a weak urine stream
- Swelling that won't go down, or the foreskin is stuck back and won't move forward (possible paraphimosis)
- Redness, discharge, a strong smell, or fever
- Any new lump or sore that doesn't heal

Final points and how to get help

What's normal varies widely. If you're unsure, uncomfortable, or worried, it's okay to ask questions. You can talk with a family doctor, school nurse, sexual-health clinic, or another trusted health professional. Doctors and clinics aim to keep medical visits confidential, but exact rules about minor confidentiality depend on where you live — if you're unsure, ask the clinic about their confidentiality policy.

If you want, tell me one specific question you have (for example: "My foreskin is tight when I get an erection" or "How do I clean if I can't retract?") and I'll explain the next steps or how to describe the issue to a doctor.