

FACT SHEET 6: CULTURAL PRACTICES

SCARIFICATION AND CIRCUMCISION ARE NOT COMMON

Scarification

Body scarification is practiced in certain ethnic groups. This carries the risk of HIV cross-infection if blades are used on more than one child at a time. The prevalence of scarification among infants (males and females) under two years of age was relatively low (10.9%). There was no significant association between scarification and HIV prevalence .

Circumcision

Male circumcision, which includes both traditional and medical circumcision, is practised widely in certain ethnic and religious groups. It was found that 4.3% of male infants under 2 years old were circumcised in comparison to 21.7% of adolescents aged 15-18 years.

Adolescents who were circumcised had mostly been circumcised for traditional reasons (41.5%) rather than for prevention of HIV and other STIs (10.5%). Around two fifths were circumcised between the ages of 10 and 14 years (41.1%) and around a third between 15 and 18 years (31.3%). The majority of male circumcisions in young males were performed in hospitals (52.6%) with 41.9% circumcised as part of initiation. Nearly one third (30.3%) of males aged 15-18 years were aware that male circumcision partly reduced the risk of HIV infection.

Table 1: The proportion of respondents that support the idea that all men should be circumcised, South Africa, 2008

	Total (15-18) N=1773	Males (15-18) N=884	Females (15-18) N=889
Support	50.3	51.0	49.5
Oppose	30.7	34.2	27.2
Undecided	19.1	14.8	23.3

Among uncircumcised males aged 15-18 years, around half (48.1%) said they would consider being circumcised. This is encouraging in the light of the evidence from randomized trials that male circumcision can reduce the risk of HIV transmission among males by as much as 50%.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A campaign to promote male circumcision for HIV prevention before males reach puberty and are sexually active should be undertaken by the Department of Health.
- There is a need for both the Council for Traditional Healers and the House of Traditional Leaders to work side-by-side with the Department of Health to ensure that the protective effects of circumcision are understood, and that appropriate training for safe circumcision be provided.

Note: *South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey, 2008: The health of our children* by Shisana et al. was part of a large national population-based household survey conducted by a research consortium led by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The survey included 8 966 children aged 0-18 years. The full report is available on www.hsrcpress.co.za.