Dear Alice,
My roommate and I were wondering whether or not there was a difference in sleeping with a man with an uncircumcised penis or one that has been cut? My roommate’s current boyfriend is uncircumcised and she has heard horror stories about sleeping with men that have uncircumcised penises.

Sincerely,
Foreskin Troubles

Answer

Dear Foreskin Troubles,

In the United States, male circumcision is pretty common (the national prevalence hovers around 77 to 80 percent on average), so an uncircumcised penis can be rather hard to come by (pun intended)! If you haven’t encountered one before, an “uncut” member can be a bit of a surprise. As with anything unknown, myths and stories about uncircumcised penises abound. In addition to this, any one person you talk to could have a personal preference: some individuals may report a preference for a circumcised member while others prefer an uncircumcised one. Preference can vary for any number of reasons (i.e., religious, cultural, or aesthetic). While there are minor differences in circumcised versus uncircumcised penises, from a health standpoint it may be helpful to know that both types of penises can provide sexual satisfaction and pleasure to their owners and their sexual partners.

The difference between a circumcised and uncircumcised penis is whether the foreskin, a highly sensitive sheath that surrounds the tip of the penis, is removed or not. Anatomically, this sheath is called the prepuce (and you may be interested to know that biologic females have an identical structure called the clitoral hood that encases the clitoris). When an uncircumcised penis is not erect, the glans penis is covered by foreskin. When the penis becomes erect and engorged with blood, the glans pushes the prepuce back so that the tip is exposed. Circumcision removes the foreskin of the penis so that even when the penis is not erect the glans is exposed. Functionally, whether a penis is circumcised or not, it works exactly the same way when it is stimulated during sex or masturbation.
So, if it functions the same sexually, what are the differences between circumcised and uncircumcised penises? While it's true that the prepuce has some sensory cells, either removing or keeping the foreskin does not impair sexual function or satisfaction (for either the individual or their partner)! That being said, there is some evidence to correlate reduced rates of urinary tract infections (UTIs), penile cancer, certain sexually transmitted infections, and slightly easier hygiene practices with circumcised penises. Research has shown that one bonus of circumcision is that it may lower the chance of contracting certain sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For example, HPV (human papilloma virus), a prevalent STI that is linked to cervical cancer and penile cancer, is transferred by contact of mucous membranes with infected sexual fluids. Removing the foreskin shrinks the surface area of mucosal skin vulnerable to the virus, decreasing the chance of transmission. In a circumcised man, the glans of the penis, which is exposed and has thicker skin, is more resistant to abrasions and therefore less susceptible to the entry of viruses. The same decreased vulnerability applies to HIV and other STIs.

**Pro tip:** while studies suggest that circumcision may contribute to lower risks of contracting these diseases, they also show that behavioral factors such as using a condom, or getting tested before having intercourse, are more effective risk reducers than just circumcision. Whether your partner is circumcised or not, consider using condoms and other safer sex practices to prevent STIs.

Another slight difference between those who have and have not been circumcised can be ease of cleaning. For uncircumcised men, a natural secretion called smegma can accumulate under the foreskin (check out Scent of an uncircumcised penis [2]). As with any fold or crease in your skin (including between the toes, or in the belly button), cleaning the area daily with gentle soap and water and drying it thoroughly can help prevent irritation or infection. That said, it's common for the partner(s) of uncircumcised men to notice a distinct odor or taste when coming in close contact with the penis and foreskin. While a circumcised penis may be easier to clean at the tip of the membrane, there can still be a normal, distinctive smell around the genitals (foreskin present or not).

While your first glance at foreskin may give you a bit of a jolt, it's certainly nothing to panic over. Because the foreskin is so sensitive, it can be pleasured just like any other sensitive, erotic part of the body. Encourage your roommate to talk to her partner about how he prefers to be touched and stimulated. Both of them may be pleased to find that a foreskin offers a whole new dimension of pleasure for all involved.

Here's to adventures in fore(skin) play!

Alice!

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