Tightness of the foreskin (phimosis)

Itanga o te kirimata

The foreskin is the loose skin that covers and protects the end of the penis (in uncircumcised males).

The foreskin in a baby boy covers the end of his penis. Often, it’s tight and can’t be pulled back as it can with older boys and adults. You should not try to pull back your baby’s or young boy’s foreskin. This could cause tearing and then scarring, which could lead to problems later.


As your boy gets older, the foreskin begins to pull back more easily. This usually happens by the time he's 5 years old, though in some boys it can take longer.

In some boys, the foreskin opening is too small to go over the head of the penis and can causes a problem known as phimosis.

**Symptoms of phimosis**

Often there are no problems with a tight foreskin, and you can wait to see if it loosens with time. See your general practice team if your boy has:

- swelling and tenderness of their penis
- pain when peeing or a weak flow of pee
- frequent urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- bleeding or a thick discharge from under their foreskin or an unpleasant smell
- swelling or bulging at the end of their penis that continues even after they've finished peeing.

**Treating phimosis**

Sometimes your doctor or specialist may suggest that phimosis needs treatment with steroid cream. This might be because of scarring, which stops the foreskin retracting, or if your boy has an infection. The steroid cream will thin the skin of the foreskin and help it stretch over the head of the penis.

**How to apply steroid cream to treat phimosis**

Apply the prescribed cream or ointment three to four times a day, every day for one month.

1) Retract the foreskin gently so you can see the tight part of the foreskin.

2) Spread a thin layer of ointment directly on the tight, shiny, narrowed part of the foreskin.

3) Take your boy back to the doctor after one month of treatment for a check.

If the cream doesn't work, you may be referred to a specialist in children’s surgery for further assessment, as sometimes circumcision is needed.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed August 2022.