Tightness of the foreskin (phimosis)

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

If your child has phimosis, it means that his foreskin can't be pulled back over the head of his penis. This is because the foreskin opening is too small to go over the head of the penis. This is normal in babies and young boys but, as they get older, the foreskin should easily pull back (at about 4 years old).

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 child has an infection. The steroid cream will thin the skin of the foreskin and help it stretch over the head of the penis. Your general practice team can advise you if this is necessary for your child, and show you how to apply the cream.

Very occasionally, if this treatment does not work, your doctor may recommend circumcision.

How to apply steroid cream to treat phimosis

Apply the prescribed cream or ointment twice a day for one month or as directed by your health professional.

1) Retract the foreskin gently so that 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 child back to the doctor after one month of treatment so they can check that the foreskin is retracting properly.

Getting help for phimosis

Take your child to the doctor immediately, if you notice any:

- bleeding in, on, or around the penis
- signs of infection, such as redness and swelling of the foreskin or penis
- poor urine stream
- pain when passing urine.

For more information about foreskin care, see Foreskin care on KidsHealth (www.kidshealth.org.nz/foreskin-care).

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed June 2019.