



Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting

Female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C), sometimes called female circumcision or female genital mutilation, means piercing, cutting, removing, or sewing closed all or part of a girl's or woman's external genitals for no medical reason. FGM/C is often a part of the culture in countries where it is practiced. But FGM/C has no health benefits and can cause long-term health problems. FGM/C is against the law in the United States and many other countries.

Q: What are the different types of FGM/C?

A: The World Health Organization describes four major types of FGM/C:

- **Type 1:** Partial or total removal of the clitoris. This is also called "clitoridectomy."
- **Type 2:** Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia (the inner and outer "lips" that surround the vagina)
- **Type 3:** Sewing the labia together to make the vaginal opening smaller. This is called infibulation. The clitoris may be left in place.
- **Type 4:** All other harm to the female genitalia for nonmedical purposes, including pricking, piercing, cutting, scraping, and cauterization (burning)

Q: Where is FGM/C done?

A: FGM/C is done mostly in parts of northern and central Africa, in the southern Sahara, and in parts of the Middle East and Asia. Some immigrants in the United States and Western Europe from these countries also practice FGM/C, or may send their daughters back to their family homeland for FGM/C. Other immigrant families stop practicing FGM/C once they are in a new country.

Q: Why is FGM/C done?

A: Different communities and cultures have different reasons for practicing FGM/C. Social acceptability is the most common reason. Families often feel pressure to have their daughter cut so she is accepted by their community.

Other reasons may include:

- **To help ensure a woman remains a virgin until marriage**
- **Hygiene.** Some communities believe that the external female genitals that are cut are unclean.
- **Rite of passage.** In some countries, FGM/C is a part of the ritual that a girl goes through to be considered a woman.
- **Condition of marriage.** In some countries, a girl or woman is cut in order to be considered suitable for marriage.
- **Belief that FGM/C increases sexual pleasure for the man**
- **Religious duty,** although no religion's holy texts require FGM/C

Q: How does FGM/C affect a girl's or woman's health immediately after the cutting?

A: Immediate medical problems can include:

- **Severe pain.** Girls usually don't get any pain medicine before or after they are cut.
- **Serious bleeding**
- **Infection of the wound.** Girls can develop fever or shock and may even die if the infection is not treated.
- **Trauma.** Girls are held down, often against their will, and may not understand why.
- **Problems going to the bathroom,** including burning and pain
- **Tetanus and other infectious diseases,** such as HIV, from unsterilized cutting tools
- **Death.** Researchers do not know how many girls die because of FGM/C. Few records are kept, and deaths that may have been caused by FGM/C are often not reported as being related to FGM/C.

Q: How does FGM/C affect a girl's or woman's health in the long term?

A: Long-term health problems include:

- **Infections**, such as genital abscesses (sores filled with pus that must be drained) and infectious diseases such as hepatitis B
- **Problems having sex**. Extra scar tissue from FGM/C (most common after type 2 or type 3) can cause pain, especially during sex.
- **Depression and anxiety**. Girls may not understand what was done to them or why. Girls or women who have already been cut and are living in the United States may be disgraced or humiliated when they receive medical care.
- **Problems urinating and painful menstrual periods**. Some women are left with only a small opening for urinating and menstrual bleeding. They may not be able to pass all of their menstrual blood or urine. This can cause infections, pain, and periods that are longer than normal.
- **Fistula, an opening between the urethra and vagina that lets urine run into the vagina**. This can happen when the urethra is damaged during FGM/C. Fistula causes incontinence and other problems, including odors, and can cause girls and women to become social outcasts.
- **Problems during and after childbirth**. Women may be at risk for longer labor and cesarean section. They are also more at risk for excessive bleeding after childbirth.

For more information...

For more information about FGM/C, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Office of Global Affairs, HHS

202-690-6174 • www.globalhealth.gov

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

202-712-4810 • www.usaid.gov

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Female Genital Cutting: Clinical Management of Circumcised Women • sales.acog.org/Female-Genital-Cutting-Clinical-Management-of-Circumcised-Women-Second-Edition-P349.aspx

Refugee Women's Alliance

206-721-0243 • www.rewa.org

Refugee Women's Health Clinic

602-344-1445 • www.refugeewomensclinic.org

World Health Organization (WHO)

Eliminating female genital mutilation: An interagency statement • apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/43839/1/9789241596442_eng.pdf

Fact sheet: female genital mutilation

www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/

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