

# Strengthening Counseling for Adolescents at VMMC Services: Group Counseling Session Cue Card

## Background

- During the group counseling session, adolescent clients will learn how voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) promotes a healthy life by reducing female-to-male sexual transmission of HIV. They will also learn about VMMC services, HIV/AIDS, and other ways they can take care of their health.
- Taking care of one's health is important because good health allows people to achieve their dreams, satisfy their needs, and live a "long, productive, and fruitful life."<sup>1</sup>

## Counseling/Communication Objectives

As a result of this counseling session, adolescent clients will:

- Increase their knowledge about VMMC and related topics, including:
  - Facts and benefits of VMMC
  - The VMMC service package
  - Wound care, healing, possible side effects, and prevention of tetanus
  - HIV/AIDS transmission and risk reduction
  - HIV testing services (HTS)
  - Correct, consistent condom use
- Be motivated and ready for more detailed discussion during individual counseling and HTS.
- Have received or been offered a condom demonstration.

## Content to Be Delivered During the Session

### Basic Facts about VMMC

#### What Is VMMC?

- VMMC is the removal of the **foreskin** of the penis by a trained doctor or nurse. The inner layer of the foreskin contains **cells** near the surface through which HIV can enter the body. The remaining skin is less likely to tear and more difficult for HIV to penetrate
- "Voluntary" means the client may accept or decline to undergo circumcision. It is their decision!
- VMMC is different from traditional circumcision. Traditional circumcision does NOT provide the same protection against HIV as VMMC. In some countries, traditional circumcision means removal of part of the foreskin. VMMC removes all of the foreskin.

Use a model or graphic to show what the foreskin is.

You may wish to define the term "cell."

Be respectful of traditional practices. Confirm that it is acceptable locally to talk about what happens during traditional circumcision. Discuss further details only if it is respectful and permissible.

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) Health-Related Quality of Life: Well-Being Concepts. <https://www.cdc.gov/hrqol/wellbeing.htm>

## Key Terms and Concepts Related to VMMC

- **Sexual intercourse** is when a man inserts his penis into his partner's vagina or anus. It can also refer to oral intercourse.<sup>2</sup> Oral intercourse is when one partner puts their mouth or tongue on their partner's penis or vagina.
- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**, such as gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, and herpes, are spread from person to person during sex (vaginal, oral, or anal) or close intimate contact. Common symptoms of STIs include discharge from the penis or vagina, a burning sensation in the penis, sores on or around the genitals, and abdominal pain.<sup>3</sup>
- **Masturbation** is when people touch their own bodies for sexual pleasure. For boys and men, this may involve stroking or rubbing the penis when it is erect. Masturbation may result in ejaculation/orgasm, but not always.

## Benefits of VMMC

- Circumcised men are at lower risk of acquiring HIV and other STIs.
- Circumcised men are at lower risk of **urinary tract infections** and **cancer of the penis**.
- Circumcised men may find it easier to maintain cleanliness of the penis and improve hygiene.

You may wish to explain/define the urinary tract, urinary tract infections, and cancer of the penis.

## VMMC Cautions and Risks

- VMMC only partially reduces the risk of acquiring HIV through sexual intercourse, so condoms must be used correctly and consistently to avoid HIV transmission after VMMC.
- Complications from VMMC are rare, but can be serious if ignored or improperly treated.
- Risks (also called "adverse events") include infections such as tetanus, a serious bacterial infection that can affect the brain and nervous system and can lead to severe muscle spasms, serious breathing difficulties, and death.

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<sup>2</sup> Sex etc. (n.d.) Sex Terms. Answer and Rutgers University. <https://sexetc.org/sex-ed/sex-terms/?pageNum=10&topic%5B%5D=sex-terms-sex&alphabet=>

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) (2019) Sexually transmitted infections (STIs). WHO fact sheet (June 14). [http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-\(stis\)](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-(stis))

## The VMMC Process: Eight Steps

1. **Registration and waiting:** Clinic staff collect the client's information and a consent form, signed by the client (if over the age of majority) or his parents or guardians.
2. **Group general education:** This counseling session, where clients receive general information about VMMC and HIV/AIDS.
3. **Individual counseling and HIV testing:** A private session where the client can ask questions and is offered **voluntary** HIV testing.
4. **Post-HIV test counseling:** If the client chooses to be tested for HIV, the counselor meets with him (and his parents or guardians if he is under the age of majority) to discuss the results.
5. **Clinical screening:** Clinic staff make sure the client is in good health for VMMC.
6. **VMMC procedure:** A doctor or nurse performs the procedure.
7. **Immediate postoperative care:** Clinic staff check that the circumcision went well and give the client information on how to take care of the wound and painkillers to manage any pain.
8. **Postoperative follow-up care and counseling:** The wound is checked to ensure proper healing.

Remind participants that they should feel free to ask questions at any time about VMMC or other topics important for maintaining good health. Tell them not to be shy. You are there to answer their questions.

## Follow-Up Care and the Healing Period

After circumcision, the doctor or nurse will provide:

- Pain medication to take home
- Instructions on wound care and when to come back for the two follow-up appointments (two and seven days following the procedure)
  - Follow-up visits are critical to ensure proper wound care and healing!

Important care and healing tips include:

- Abstain from masturbation and sexual intercourse for six weeks after the VMMC procedure.
- Do NOT put any herbs, cow dung, or any other substances on the wound. It should be kept dry!
- Following these instructions for wound care will help avoid infections such as tetanus, a serious bacterial infection that affects the brain and nervous system and can lead to severe muscle spasms, serious breathing difficulties, and death.

## Basic Facts about HIV/AIDS

### Overview of HIV and AIDS

- HIV is the human immunodeficiency virus. It can enter the body in various ways, and is the virus that causes AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).
- Both HIV and AIDS affect the immune system. The immune system helps the body fight germs that cause diseases.
- When a person is living with HIV, the immune system becomes weaker over time, making it harder for the body to fight off certain types of diseases.
- AIDS develops after someone has lived with the HIV virus in their body, usually for many years. AIDS severely weakens the immune system, leading to serious infections and health problems.
- Medicines called “anti-retroviral” drugs or “ARVs” can help prevent HIV from developing into AIDS.
- People living with HIV can live long, healthy lives by taking ARVs and getting regular checkups with a doctor, nurse, or other health care provider.
- People living with HIV should start on ARVs as soon as possible to prevent the virus from spreading through the body and weakening the immune system.
- A person living with HIV can be and look healthy but still transmit HIV to others.

#### HIV is transmitted through:

- Unprotected sex or sex without a condom with an HIV-positive person
- Blood (contaminated injection equipment, open sores/wounds on or around the penis/genitals, infected blood transfusions)
- From a pregnant woman living with HIV to her baby in her womb, during delivery, or through her breast milk

You may wish to show adolescent clients a condom to confirm they know what one is.

You may wish to discuss the four bodily fluids through which HIV is transmitted: blood, semen, breastmilk, vaginal fluids.

#### HIV cannot be transmitted through:<sup>4</sup>

- Shaking hands or hugging
- Air or water
- Saliva, tears, or closed-mouth kissing
- Insects (including mosquitoes) or pets
- Sharing toilets, food, or drinks

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<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) HIV: HIV Basics: HIV Transmission. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/transmission.html>

## Known Risk Factors for HIV

- Having sex without a condom with a person living with HIV (whether or not the person's HIV status is known)
- Having more than one sexual partner
- Sharing syringes, needles, or other sharp objects; or injecting drugs with used/unclean needles contaminated with HIV
- Presence of other STIs, which makes it easier to become infected with HIV
- NOT being circumcised (for men). Remember: VMMC provides partial protection against HIV

## How to Prevent HIV

- Use condoms correctly and consistently when having sex. Condom use can also help prevent unplanned pregnancies.
- Avoid having many sexual partners at the same time.
- Avoid sharing syringes, needles, or other sharp objects that could be contaminated with HIV.

## Voluntary HIV Testing

- HIV testing is important because a person could be HIV-positive and not know it if they have not been tested for HIV recently and have been exposed to the HIV virus.
- After the group counseling session, participants will be offered a **voluntary** HIV test. Voluntary means they are free to choose to get tested or not.
- The test is also **confidential**. Everything you discuss with the counselor will be kept private between you and the counselor.

## Condom Demonstration

Before ending the session, discuss relevant information about sex and offer to give a condom demonstration:

- The condom demonstration is NOT meant to encourage adolescents to start having sex at an early age. Rather, it is intended to build participants' awareness and skills so that when they are ready to have sex they know how to use a condom and understand why it is important.
- The demonstration is **optional**. Anyone that does not want to see the demonstration can step outside to the waiting area.
- Confirm: Can I proceed with the discussion and condom demonstration?

Before the condom demonstration, discuss what it means to "have sex":

- Sex, sexual activity, and physical affection include many behaviors, from hugging, kissing, and touching the genitals (your private parts), to sexual intercourse. As discussed earlier, examples of sexual activity include vaginal, anal, and oral sex.

- Reasons people have sex include:
  - To feel closer to or express love for their partner
  - To have children
  - Because they like how it feels
  - To feel more grown up
  - For things they need to survive—money, food, etc.
  - For gifts
  - Because someone is forcing/pressuring them to have sex (this is a violation of their human rights)
- Sex is a normal part of life. Yet, if sex is a normal part of life, why do adults warn young people NOT to have sex until they are ready?
- Conduct a condom demonstration for interested participants.

Allow participants to brainstorm answers. If they do not mention the following reasons for waiting to have sex, bring them up to the group:

- You can get someone pregnant
- You can get HIV and other STIs (participants might merely say **diseases**—that's OK)
- To help them avoid emotional heartache
- Because waiting until marriage is part of my personal/community's/family's beliefs
- Because they do not think we are ready