



The Republic of Uganda
Ministry of Health

Safe Male Circumcision Fact Sheet For Religious Leaders

INTRODUCTION

This fact sheet is meant for religious leaders. It provides basic information about safe male circumcision for HIV prevention. Religious leaders can use this information to provide guidance about HIV prevention to their congregation. The Ministry of Health recommends safe male circumcision as an additional HIV prevention strategy. National Safe Male circumcision policy calls for voluntary circumcision for all men.

WHAT IS SAFE MALE CIRCUMCISION (SMC)?

Safe Male Circumcision (SMC) is the removal of the fore skin on a man's penis. SMC is carried out in a health facility as one of the ways to reducing the risk of HIV infection in men.

WHAT MAKES CIRCUMCISION BY A HEALTH WORKER SAFE?

Safe male circumcision is performed by a well trained health worker. The health worker discusses with the client the health benefits of SMC, possible threats and the desired behaviour after the surgery. The client is examined to decide if he is healthy and fit for circumcision. The health worker then performs the surgery, using clean surgical tools.

WHY IS A RELIGIOUS LEADER'S GUIDANCE ON SMC FOR HIV PREVENTION IMPORTANT?

- More than 95% of Ugandans are Christians or Muslims, according to the 2002 census.
- Religious leaders reach more people than health workers.
- Many people in Uganda trust and look up to you for spiritual and practical guidance.
- Religious leaders have been at the forefront of the effort to prevent HIV.
- Religious leaders can use faith based teachings and structures to back up HIV prevention messages including SMC.
- The battle against HIV involves the entire community with the church as its centre. It is your responsibility to take part – for yourself, your family and the whole congregation.
- Life is all about choices. The Bible urges us to make the wise and the good choice, SMC is wise, and so is abstaining from sex, especially after the SMC procedure, and being faithful in general (Proverbs 4: 26-27 and Job 34: 3-4)

WHY IS THERE A HIGHER RISK OF HIV INFECTION FOR AN UNCIRCUMCISED MAN?

The inner layer of the foreskin is delicate and can be bruised or torn during sexual intercourse, thereby enabling HIV to enter the body. When the penis is erect, the surface area of the inner layer of the foreskin increases and is exposed to the virus.

There is a layer of naturally wet and permeable cells inside the foreskin where HIV or other viruses can hide for some time, and finally gain entry into the bloodstream.

Wounds tend to develop inside the foreskin, in case of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and this makes it easier for HIV to enter the body.

DOES SMC PROVIDE FULL PROTECTION AGAINST HIV INFECTION?

SMC only reduces a man's risk of getting HIV. It does not provide full protection! To work well, SMC should be combined with other safer sex practices (e.g. abstinence from sex, sticking to one sexual partner who is HIV negative, seeking counselling and testing for HIV, or using condoms).

Avoid, excessive drinking of alcohol to avoid losing control and engaging in risky behaviour, including having unprotected sex.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER BENEFITS OF SAFE MALE CIRCUMCISION?

- SMC reduces risks of wounds that can easily form inside the foreskin of an uncircumcised man. Wounds can attract sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- SMC reduces the risk of a man getting cancer of the penis
- SMC protects women from cancer of the cervix.
- Sexual partners of circumcised men face lower risks of other sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and genital herpes
- SMC is also recommended when a man's foreskin cannot be easily moved on and off the head of the penis
- SMC improves a man's hygiene.

DOES SMC AFFECT A PERSON'S RELIGION?

Safe Male Circumcision is recommended for health reasons. Research conducted in Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa showed that SMC reduces a man's risk of HIV infection by about 60%. This means that new HIV infections among sexually active men can be reduced by more than half if most of them are circumcised. Whereas some religions promote male circumcision as part of their faiths, SMC is a scientific intervention to promote public health. SMC is carried out by medical personnel, using medically approved tools, and following standard medical procedures. SMC services are available to all men and boys, irrespective of their religious beliefs. Circumcision can be done at any age. Abraham was circumcised at 95 years while his son Ishmael was 13 (Gen 17:24-26). Jesus was circumcised 8 days after birth (Lk 2:21) and so was St Paul (Phil 3:5). Circumcised or not, God accepts people on the strength of their faith (Rom 3:30) and adherence to His commandments (1 Cor 7:19). Abraham was justified only by his belief in God (Galatians 3:6).

WILL SMC THREATEN THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY?

Men and boys who are not married should abstain from sex even if they are circumcised. Married men should discuss and agree with their partners before seeking SMC. This is because they need to make a joint decision to abstain from sex for 42 days after circumcision in order to allow full wound healing. Men and their sexual partners, therefore, should go to the health facility together to get proper counselling about the general benefits and limitations of SMC, particularly in HIV prevention. Though SMC provides numerous health benefits, it does not immunise a man against HIV infection. A circumcised man should test for HIV with his sexual partner and remain faithful to avoid infection.

WHAT CAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS DO TO SUPPORT HIV PREVENTION?

- Refer your followers to health facilities for HIV counselling and testing.
- Involve health workers in activities of your religious institution, and give them an opportunity to talk to individuals and/or the congregation about HIV prevention.
- Provide direct information and guidance to individuals and/or the congregation about HIV prevention including SMC
- Use religious ceremonies like weddings, funerals, confirmations to raise awareness about safe male circumcision and HIV prevention.
- Counsel couples intending to marry about HIV prevention including SMC
- Encourage them to wear an amour like SMC that can help reduce their risk of getting HIV but it does not mean that they cannot be killed - ensure that you protect yourself from HIV. "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." Ephesians 6: 13

