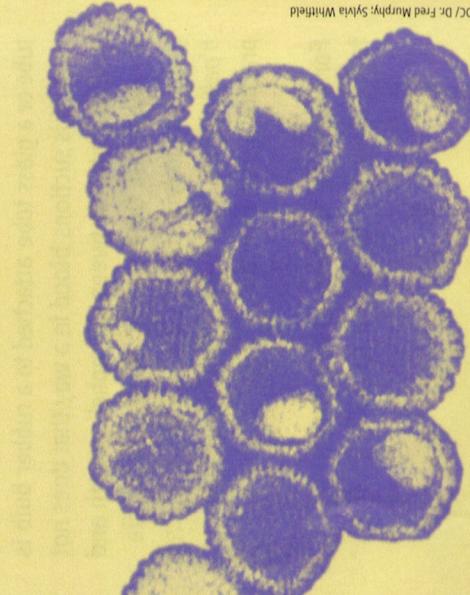


Before the Bris

Metzitzah b'peh, which is performed during some religious circumcisions, has been known to cause herpes virus infections in infants.

The Health Department recommends that parents ask a mohel if he practices *metzitzah b'peh* before choosing a mohel.

How to Protect Your Infant Against Herpes



CDC/Fred Murphy/Sylvia Whitfield

Electron micrograph of herpes simplex virions



State of New York
Department of Health

Many families want to honor religious traditions when their children are born. But, a practice called *metzitzah b'peh*, which is performed during some religious circumcisions, has been known to cause herpes virus infections in infants. There is no proven way to eliminate the risk of *metzitzah b'peh*. However, there are at least two ways to potentially reduce the risk of infection.

Metzitzah b'peh is performed by some mohelim, or religious circumcisers, in the Jewish community. It involves suctioning the circumcision wound by mouth. The mohel's mouth and lips come into direct contact with the newborn's freshly circumcised penis. The New York State Department of Health has documented cases of herpes in male infants after circumcisions that included *metzitzah b'peh*. Some of these infants became seriously ill. One baby died, and two others suffered brain damage.

Because a newborn's immune system is not mature enough to fight infection, the herpes virus is a very serious risk for infants. If a mohel is infected with oral herpes, his practice of *metzitzah b'peh* can expose the infant to the herpes virus. Even though death from this practice may be rare, there is a definite risk of infection. If infected, the infant will need to be hospitalized for treatment. Even with treatment, the infant may have lifelong disability.

The Health Department recommends that infants being circumcised not undergo *metzitzah b'peh*. To help you protect your baby, we want to make sure that parents understand the risk **before** the day of the bris, while there is time to take necessary precautions or explore other options.

Ask About *metzitzah b'peh* Before the Day of the Bris

Some parents whose infants had *mezitzah b'peh* say they did not know beforehand that the mohel would perform it. The Health Department recommends that parents ask a mohel if he practices *metzitzah b'peh* before choosing a mohel. This will give parents time to plan accordingly, including considering other options.

How *metzitzah b'peh* Can Spread Herpes

More than half of adults have oral herpes. Oral herpes may cause mouth sores but most people with oral herpes do not know they are infected and they do not have symptoms. People can spread herpes even when they don't have any symptoms. Newborn infants are at risk for severe infection if they are exposed to herpes. This is because their immune systems are still not mature enough to fight off infection. In *metzitzah b'peh*, the mohel places his mouth directly on the freshly circumcised penis to draw blood away from the cut. Oral herpes spreads easily through saliva.

This is especially true when saliva containing the herpes virus touches a cut or break in the skin, such as during *metzitzah b'peh*. If the mohel has oral herpes he may not know it and he may accidentally transmit herpes to the baby when he performs *metzitzah b'peh*.

Reducing the Risk

There is no proven way to eliminate the risk of *metzitzah b'peh*. If *metzitzah b'peh* is performed despite the known risks, however, there are at least two ways to potentially reduce the risk of infection. One: a mohel can take antiviral medicine that may reduce the risk of spreading herpes. Two: a mohel can use an oral rinse with alcohol-containing mouthwash before *metzitzah b'peh*. But, there is no proof that taking these actions eliminates the risk of transmitting herpes by *metzitzah b'peh* – a baby may still get sick with herpes. For more information, please talk with your pediatrician or family doctor.

Many Do Not Practice *metzitzah b'peh*

Some religious authorities consider *metzitzah b'peh* the only acceptable way to draw blood away from the circumcision cut. But, others use different means. For example, sometimes a glass tube or a glass tube attached to a rubber bulb is used. This suctions blood in a way that does not include contact between the mohel's mouth and the baby's cut. Others use a sponge or a sterile gauze pad to wipe blood away. Unlike *metzitzah b'peh*, there is no evidence that any of these practices cause infection.

For more information on circumcision, talk to your family doctor or pediatrician.