



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
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Commissioner

New York City Statement on

Jewish Ritual Circumcision with Direct Oral Suctioning - *Metzitzah B'peh*

To protect the health of infants, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene strongly advises parents and *mohelim* (religious circumcisers) to follow strict infection control practices whenever a male baby is circumcised. Circumcision involves cutting off skin and leaving an open wound on the penis. To protect the open wound from infection, circumcision should always be done under sterile conditions. The Department also strongly advises that *metzitzah b'peh* with direct oral suctioning of the circumcision wound ("direct oral suctioning") never be performed.

Since 2004, the Department has investigated and documented a number of cases of herpes simplex virus type-1 (HSV-1) infection in male infants following ritual circumcision with direct oral suctioning. While HSV-1 in adults can cause the common cold sore, HSV-1 infection in newborns is very serious. Most of the children reported were hospitalized, some developed brain damage, and two died.

Most adults are infected with HSV-1 and have HSV-1 in their mouths and saliva from time to time but do not have any symptoms. HSV-1 infection can spread when infected saliva touches a mucous membrane or a cut or break in the skin. With direct oral suctioning, the mohel places his mouth and lips directly on the infant's circumcision wound to draw blood away from the cut. A mohel can have HSV-1 infection without knowing it and may transmit HSV-1 to the baby even if the mohel has no symptoms.

Some religious authorities approve of suctioning blood from the site with a sterile glass tube. Others approve of the use of a sponge or a sterile gauze pad to wipe the blood away. There is no evidence that these methods, all of which avoid direct contact between the mohel's mouth and the baby's cut, cause HSV-1 infection in newborns.

The Department will work with health care providers, the community, and parents to prevent HSV-1 infection among newborn males undergoing ritual Jewish circumcision.