



Female Genital Cutting and Living in Australia

*Information for communities
and their health providers*

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humanity



What is female genital cutting?

Female genital cutting (FGC: also known as female genital mutilation) is:

“All procedures involving partial or total removal of the external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for cultural or any other non-medical reasons.”

– World Health Organisation¹

Where is female genital cutting practiced?

FGC is practiced in different ways by different communities around the world. It is practiced in many countries in Africa, as well as some countries in Asia and the Middle East. It is also practiced in countries such as France, Canada, the USA and Australia if people continue the practice after migration.

Why is female genital cutting practiced?

There are many reasons why female genital cutting is practiced, including:

- **Culture and society:** Some communities believe that FGC is important for a girl to become a woman; for hygiene and cleanliness; for beauty; or for other traditional reasons. If a woman is not cut, she could be excluded from social life. Some communities also believe that FGC is necessary for women to have children.
- **Religion:** FGC is practiced by people from many religions including Christianity, Islam and other traditional religions. Some people believe that FGC is a part of their religion however neither the Bible nor the Koran support FGC.
- **Being a woman:** FGC can be used as a way for families to control a woman's sexual life. Some people believe that FGC protects virginity or will ensure a woman is faithful to her husband.
- **Money:** In some cultures if a woman is not cut it can be hard for her to get married, and her family could be disadvantaged. Also, in some communities, the people who perform FGC earn money from this practice and therefore encourage the community to continue it.

1. World Health Organisation, Female Genital Mutilation Fact Sheet, February 2012: www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/

About the program

In Tasmania, Australian Red Cross works to improve the health of people from refugee backgrounds and their communities. We do this by working with community members, providing information and supporting people to develop skills, literacy and knowledge about the health care system.

The Bi-Cultural Community Health program is run by Red Cross staff, including a team of Bi-Cultural Community Health workers who understand the health care challenges their communities face. We work in collaboration with local communities and services to provide vital health information and support.

We work with health care service providers in Tasmania to build the sector's knowledge of the health, access and equity issues new arrivals face, and



Red Cross Bi-Cultural Community Health workers in Tasmania understand the health care challenges their communities face. Australian Red Cross/Chelsea Parson

to develop culturally responsive services when providing care to this group.

For more information about the Bi-Cultural Community Health program please visit redcross.org.au/bi-cultural-health

There are different types of FGC

TYPE 1: The clitoris is removed. The clitoris is the very sensitive part of the woman that is aroused during sex.

TYPE 2: The clitoris and the skin around it are removed. Sometimes there is stitching as well.

TYPE 3: The clitoris is removed and the lips of the vagina are pulled tight and sewn together, leaving a very small hole. This is called *infibulation* or *pharaonic circumcision*.

TYPE 4: Includes any cutting, burning, stretching or other injury to a woman's genitals.

Often FGC is performed with dirty instruments and no pain relief; however, in some countries cutting is performed by medical people.

Does female genital cutting cause health problems?

Yes. Women who have experienced FGC can have many health problems.

Health problems after cutting may include:

- Bleeding
- Fever and shock
- Fear and distress
- Pain
- Infections, including the risk of HIV infection
- Problems passing urine (going to the toilet)
- Death

Health problems for the rest of a woman's life may include:

- Infertility (not able to have babies)
- Problems during childbirth
- Increased chance a baby becomes sick straight after birth
- Women may need more surgeries (like a caesarean when having a baby)
- Problems with having sex
- Continuing infections
- Bad scarring
- Emotional issues and trauma

There is no health benefit to practicing female genital cutting.

Can we circumcise girls in Australia?

No. It is against the law to cut or circumcise girls' genitals in Australia. Many countries in Africa and Europe are also making FGC illegal.

Although it is illegal in many countries, it is not against the law to have had FGC done before arriving in Australia.

What does the law say in Tasmania?

Female genital cutting is illegal in Tasmania, and the rest of Australia.²

You can go to jail if you:

- Cut a woman or girl's genitals; or
- Help or organise someone else to cut a woman or girl's genitals.

It is illegal for a parent or guardian to consent to FGC being performed on their child.

It is also illegal to take a child under 18 out of Australia to have FGC performed.

2. Tasmanian Criminal Code Act 1924, sections 178A, 178B, 178C.

What is my responsibility to those at risk?

Workers, volunteers and community members in Tasmania are required to report if they think a child is in danger of having their genitals cut, suspect a child or girl has had their genitals cut since living in Australia, or if they know someone is performing the practice in Tasmania. People who know this practice is happening and do not report it can be charged under the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act (1997)*.

You can report it to:

- **Child Protection**
on 1300 737 639 or online at www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/children/child_protection_services
- **Gateway Services**
on 1800 171 233
- **Tasmanian Police**
on 131 444 or by visiting your local police station
- **Crime Stoppers**
on 1800 333 000



What should I do if I think someone is at risk of female genital cutting?

If you are worried that you or a child you know has been taken overseas for FGC, please call the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's 24/7 Consular Emergency Centre on 1300 555 135 (from Australia).

If you are an Australian Resident or Citizen living overseas, please call +61 2 6261 3304 (from overseas) or contact the nearest Australian overseas mission. A list of overseas missions is available online at smartraveller.gov.au

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade also has information about FGC on its website at smartraveller.gov.au/tips/female-genital-mutilation.html

Working with girls and women who have experienced female genital cutting

Growing up in Australia

Some girls who have experienced FGC before coming to Australia might grow up feeling different to other girls. They might not understand why they were circumcised because they are growing up between two very different cultures. Families need to discuss FGC with their daughters if it was something that they have experienced in the past.

Childbirth and Pregnancy

Women who have had FGC performed should be treated with sensitivity and respect by health professionals. If a pregnant woman has experienced FGC it is important that she tells her local doctor or hospital maternity unit in the early stages of pregnancy so they can discuss the birth. Women can ask to have a family member or friend present at the birth for support.

When a woman who has had FGC is pregnant, it is also important to discuss re-sewing after childbirth with their doctor or midwife so they know what to expect after delivery.

Deinfibulation

Anyone who needs help with opening a circumcision (deinfibulation) can speak to their doctor or the gynaecology department at their local hospital. This service is covered under Medicare when the opening is asked for by the woman or girl.

Feelings about circumcision

Women who have had FGC do not have to be embarrassed or ashamed. FGC has been practiced for generations in some countries and has been part of cultural traditions. Some Australians, including health workers, may not know about the practice and may ask embarrassing questions or make insensitive comments. We should remember this is not necessarily intentional but is the result of lack of understanding and awareness.



Culture and Tradition

Our cultural identities should make us proud. Without them we wouldn't know who we are or where we have come from. Every culture has positive and negative traditions and this is the same for our cultures too. Let us keep and maintain the positive parts of our heritage and break the cycle of harmful traditions such as female cutting and circumcision. Let the new generation of girls be safe to grow into women without suffering as others have.

Contact us

For more information about female genital cutting in Australia, or to request a Red Cross training session for healthcare professionals in Tasmania, please contact the Red Cross Bi-Cultural Community Health Program on:

40 Melville St
Hobart TAS 7000

Free Call 1800 246 850

E tasbiculturalhealth@redcross.org.au

If you suspect a person is at risk of female genital mutilation or cutting, contact:

- Child Protection on 1300 737 639
 - Gateway Services on 1800 171 233
 - Tasmanian Police on 131 444 or by visiting your local police station
 - Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000
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How can I become a supporter?

Red Cross relies on committed volunteers, members and donors.

You can support Red Cross by:

- 1 *giving* monthly, leaving a bequest in your will or making a one-off donation;
- 2 *visiting* your local Red Cross store;
- 3 *donating* blood.

redcross.org.au or call 1800 811 700

June 2015

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