European Jewish Association
The Jewish Voice of Europe

EJA FACTSHEET
Brit Milah
- Circumcision



In Judaism, circumcision, known as Brit Milah (meaning "Covenant of Circumcision") or simply a Bris, is the oldest and one of the most central religious rites. It serves as a physical sign of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, first commanded to the patriarch Abraham.

It is fundamental to the Jewish faith, and the procedure has been carried out on many millions of children (and adult converts) across the world for over 3000 years. It entails the removal of a small part of the foreskin on an 8-day old baby's penis.

According to documented medical research, circumcised children have a lower risk of urinary tract infection, a lower risk of penile cancer, a lower risk of penile infections, and a lower risk of some sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Those performing the circumcisions - known as Mohalim within Jewish communities are respected for their inter-generational experience transmitted for millennia and trusted to carry out this minor procedure by traditional Jewish families. Moreover, such is the faith and trust in Mohel expertise by non-Jews that the current King of the United Kingdom, Charles, was circumcised as an infant in 1948 by Rabbi Jacob Snowman, an eminent Mohel.

Circumcision has come under pressure from several sources, with proponents against circumcision arguing in favour of bodily autonomy, opposing non-therapeutic surgery on minors who cannot consent, and seeing it as a violation of physical integrity.

The EJA believes and advocates for Mohalim to be continued to perform circumcision and for Jews to be allowed to carry out the practice unhindered, under freedom of religion. It is working closely with the European Commission to establish a fully approved central registry of approved Mohalim.

The EJA utterly rejects attempts to portray the practice as unsafe and cruel, arguing that presenting it as such stigmatises Jewish families and casts negative aspersions on Jewish parents.

Brit Milah in Detail:

No single EU-wide law on male circumcision exists, but the Council of Europe urges members to balance religious freedom with children's right to physical integrity, requiring safe procedures, parental consent, and information on risks.

The debate surrounding Circumcision is rarely medical, but instead centres on religious rights versus bodily autonomy, with different countries implementing varied regulations or allowing practice under specific safety conditions, prioritizing child protection while accommodating cultural practices.

Key European Bodies & Recommendations:

The European Union doesn't have direct legislation affecting circumcision, allowing national lawmakers to reflect interpretations of European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 9 (religion) vs. child rights.

Country-Specific Examples:

- **Germany:** After a court ruling labelled circumcision bodily harm, legislation was passed to permit it under conditions ensuring no "unnecessary pain," requiring informed consent and often anaesthesia, sparking debate.
- **Sweden:** Introduced laws requiring anaesthesia, written parental consent after age 4, and medical oversight, aiming to balance rights and child protection.
- **Other Countries:** Legislation varies widely, with some focusing on medical justification and others allowing religious practice with safeguards, reflecting diverse cultural contexts.

It is the lack of a uniform legislative framework, coupled with freedom of interpretation that has led to current controversies over what is, in essence, a minor procedure carried out on millions of Jewish infants, with minimal pain, and only extremely rarely with complications.

Mohalim go through an extensive study process that includes mentoring and anatomy training. The inter-generational experience handed from Mohel to Mohel pose no medical threat to any infant and are, for traditional and faith reasons, the preferred option for traditional Jewish families.

Freedom of Religion is a fundamental right, and Brit Milah is a defining and core tenet of admittance into the Jewish Faith.

The EJA is working with the European Institutions to establish a 'centre of excellence' where Mohalim can register and be approved to carry out the procedure. The centre also aims to be a repository for best practice, evolving medical evidence, and general information about circumcision. The centre will be certified by the European Commission Department for Health.