



# Frequently Asked Questions: Communicating the Updated PEPFAR Guidance on VMMC and 10–14-Year-Olds

June 2020



## Boys 10-14

**Q.** My older brother was circumcised when he was 13 years old and all went well. Why is it not safe for me to be circumcised at the same age as he was?

**A.** PEPFAR regularly monitors the safety of male circumcision services. Recent data shows that there is an increased risk of complications in the 10–14 age group. Although complications are rare, they are more likely for clients under 15 years old. It is therefore advisable to wait until the recommended age of 15 years or older to decrease this small risk even further.



## Parents/Guardians/Teachers

**Q.** My 12-year-old boy wants to be circumcised. Am I allowed to do this if I can afford to pay for it?

**A.** Although VMMC is a safe procedure, new evidence shows that there can be a higher risk of injuries in younger boys, whose male genitalia are not fully developed. Considering this new information and to minimize risk and ensure your son's safety, we recommend that boys 10–14 years of age wait till 15 years of age to be circumcised.

**Q.** Why should I wait till my son turns 15 to go for VMMC when I can take him now to the traditional circumciser?

**A.** Traditional circumcision is often a partial circumcision and does not have the health and HIV prevention benefits of medical male circumcision. With traditional circumcision, there is a much greater risk of severe complications such as injury and bleeding, as it is performed by someone with no formal medical training and under unclean conditions. Medical male circumcision, on the other hand, is performed by well-trained medical personnel using clean medical equipment and supplies. The medical team performs an assessment, ensuring that older boys and men receive an adequate package of age-appropriate services before, during, and after circumcision. This in turn ensures proper healing and prevention of any complications.

**Q.** Why is your clinic refusing the younger boys but that clinic down the road is still circumcising the younger ones?

**A.** Male circumcision services are funded through different sources. All U.S. Government PEPFAR-supported VMMC services will take the lead in promoting the safety of boys and all VMMC clients. PEPFAR programs will no longer perform circumcisions for 10–14-year-old boys.

We hope that there will be harmonization of guidance on age eligibility so that all VMMC service providers in the country including private providers, the Ministry of Health (MOH), and PEPFAR-supported programs follow the same standard guidelines. At this time, we are not sure if the guidelines will be the same across all stakeholders, especially at the start, but we shall encourage all stakeholders to ensure that services are safe for all age groups. The World Health Organization (WHO) will be sharing updated guidelines that will help to further harmonize policy guidance at the national level.



**Q. What if a boy is under 15 years but physically mature?**

**A.** To be consistent, boys will be circumcised if they are 15 years of age old or older. However, the PEPFAR Country Operational Plan 2020 (COP20) guidelines on VMMC propose exploring the use of the Shang Ring device, which is prequalified by WHO for age groups 10 years and above. In a few priority countries, where the Shang Ring has been approved by PEPFAR for use already, boys <15 years will be receiving circumcision using this device. Where Shang Ring services are available, boys under age 15 may be referred appropriately; but where these services do not exist, the boys should wait till they are 15 years old. The boy's safety, however, is the most important consideration, and it may be most appropriate to defer circumcision until the right age, when it's safer to conduct the procedure.

**Q. What if the Shang Ring device is available in my country? Then is it permitted to circumcise those under 15 years using this device?¹**

**A.** The use of Shang Ring devices in PEPFAR-supported programs in 10–14-year-old boys must be pre-approved by PEPFAR and conducted with appropriate safety and monitoring protocols in place, as outlined in COP20 guidance. Additional safety monitoring resources will be shared and all countries with approved targets among 10–14-year-old will be advised to use them.

**Q. I have heard that Shang Ring is a safer circumcision method for these young boys. Is this true? If this is true, why is Shang Ring not introduced in our VMMC facilities or country?**

**A.** Shang Ring is a safe and acceptable VMMC method. It has recently been approved by WHO to be used for ages 10 years and above. Countries have recently started including targets for Shang Ring use for all age groups, while a number of other countries are completing research on safety and acceptability, which the MOH requires before the method can be officially accepted in a country. Given that this is a new method, more countries will start using Shang Ring in subsequent years. A new method, however requires planning for supplies, staff training, and plans for safety monitoring, which all countries must have in place before they can start using it.

**Q. What services can we provide for those 10–14 years old who turn up at the VMMC facility?**

**A.** For those between ages 10 and 14 years who are not eligible for immediate VMMC, age-appropriate comprehensive sexual health education (sexual risk avoidance or risk reduction) and tetanus vaccine booster (if DPT coverage was under 70% in that birth cohort) should be provided if available. The boys (and their parents/guardians) should be advised to return and receive VMMC at age 15.

**Q. Only a few months ago you were saying it was ok for a 10-year-old to be circumcised, so why are you now saying that it is not ok?**

**A.** PEPFAR regularly collects information on the safety of male circumcision and continues to adapt the program as safer methods are identified. In the past, PEPFAR advised switching from the forceps-guided to the dorsal slit surgical method to reduce complications in this age group. However, a review of data on severe adverse events continued to show increased numbers of complications in young boys aged 10–14.

**Q. What do we tell 10–14-year-old boys who may be sexually active and have heard that circumcision protects them from HIV?**

**A.** The target for male circumcision programs is to reach young and older men who are at risk of acquiring HIV to provide circumcision services and prevent HIV acquisition. Young men in such a category should be assessed for their HIV risk to ensure that they receive appropriate services, including counseling on sexual risk reduction methods (i.e., consistent, correct use of condoms; reducing the number of sexual partners; knowing one's own and one's partner's HIV status) and provision of condoms. A young boy who is sexually active may be referred to facilities providing VMMC using Shang Ring devices, if available. Otherwise, encourage him to come back for VMMC when he turns 15.



## Providers

**Q.** Is there new information we should provide to older adolescents and men about the risks they face when they decide to circumcise?

**A.** Male circumcision is generally a safe procedure, with very minimal complications, most of which are preventable (or manageable at the facility) if well-trained medical staff are in charge. The risks or complications of older adolescents are very low, and not different than those of adult men. Information on all VMMC complications should be shared with all VMMC clients, and with parents/guardians of minor clients, during information sessions, including during the informed consent process.

**Q.** Our facility charges a fee for circumcision services on demand for ages not covered by the PEPFAR program. What does this PEPFAR guidance change mean for us?

**A.** We hope there will be national-level harmonization of PEPFAR, WHO, and national policies on the age of eligibility for male circumcision. All male circumcision programs, including private providers' programs, should follow WHO guidelines. For facilities receiving funding from different sources, the expectation is that if such facilities also receive PEPFAR funding, they will follow PEPFAR guidelines, and will not charge fees, or circumcise boys aged 10–14 using PEPFAR funding.



## Implementing partners/Country Staff

**Q.** The MOH strategy in our country still supports circumcision for HIV prevention from 10 years and above. How do we reconcile these two policies?

**A.** We hope that there will be policy harmonization at the country level to ensure consistency of age eligibility guidelines, or at least recognition of additional risks in young men and the need to improve safety in the 10–14 age group (for any programs that may continue circumcisions in this age group). Country programs are encouraged to follow WHO guidelines. PEPFAR-supported programs will continue exploring safer methods such as use of the Shang Ring devices.

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