

Q What is Milah?

Milah means circumcision, and is commonly referred to as “Brit (or Bris) Milah” which literally translates as “Covenant of Circumcision.” For Jews, male circumcision is the fulfilment of a Divine command which is designated 13 times as a covenant between God and the Jewish people. Unless there is a medical contraindication, part of the tradition is that Brit Milah takes place on the baby’s eighth day even if it coincides with the Sabbath or another holy day. The procedure itself consists of the removal of the foreskin using surgical tools accompanied throughout by a series of liturgical blessings and prayers. In medical parlance it is sometimes described as “non-therapeutic neonatal male circumcision for social, religious and cultural reasons. If there is any doubt whatsoever about the baby’s health, the ceremony is postponed until he is entirely healthy.

Q. Are all Jews Circumcised?

Inevitably there are a small number of Jewish men who, for whatever reason, were never circumcised. However, for the vast majority of people who identify as a part of the Jewish community, Brit Milah is a primary symbol of “Jewishness” for men. There are many with no other connection to Judaism who will ensure that their sons are circumcised. Additionally, the competence and consistent results of Mohelim (see below) are reflected by the number of non-Jewish parents who use their services. For several centuries this included members of the Royal Family.

Q. Who Performs Milah?

The Brit Milah ceremony and procedure is conducted by a “Mohel” (plural “Mohelim”). He is required to be a committed Jew and may be a qualified doctor as well. (The General Medical Council permits doctors to perform Brit Milah on children after parental consent has been obtained, in recognition of the social, cultural and religious significance to the family.)

In the United Kingdom the training, examination and supervision of most Mohelim is under the auspices of the Initiation Society of Great Britain which was founded in ~1740. Traditionally the Initiation Society has appointed a Medical Officer who monitors Brit Milah and reports to their Council. The Court of the Chief Rabbi (also known as the London Beth Din, the Jewish Ecclesiastical Court) plays an important role in advising the Initiation Society, as do, local Ecclesiastical Courts in other parts of the UK, the Federation of Synagogues, the Spanish and Portuguese community and the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. There are also similar trained and monitored doctors who work with the Reform and Liberal communities to perform circumcisions for their members. A Mohel’s duties demand a combination of the highest standards of ethics, religious practice and surgical skills (including strict hygiene).

Q. Are there any medical implications of Milah?

As noted above, the reasons for observance of this fundamental Jewish law are religious and cultural. Whilst the Jewish community is aware of media and medical reports about positive medical implications, such reports are not relevant to the Jewish motivation for Brit Milah. Equally the Jewish community is aware of reports which suggest that there are specific negative effects of the procedure. Millions of Jews and non-Jews have been circumcised worldwide, over many centuries, with very few major medical complications.

Q. Is any anaesthetic provided?

The skin is treated with appropriate cleansing solutions and sweet liquid or juice is often fed to the baby. No formal anaesthesia is given routinely. It is important to note that traditional Milah is standardised and different from Plastibell or hospital surgical methods. Fathers often report that their sons begin crying when their nappies are removed or when their legs are held in place and that there is no audible difference in their cry during the procedure. It has been suggested that

administering a local anaesthetic at this age would itself involve pain and discomfort, and that there is a risk involved in any other more generalized anaesthetic procedure. Some parents administer topical anaesthetic cream on and around the foreskin before Brit Milah is performed.

Q. What is the role of Milah UK?

The defence of the UK Jewish community's religious freedom to perform Brit Milah according to its traditions is fundamental to Jewish life. Therefore, Milah UK was formed in 2012 as a cross communal organisation with the remit of defending our right to continue the practice. Stakeholders are the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the United Synagogue, the Federation of Synagogues, the Spanish and Portuguese community and the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Milah UK maintains close contact with the Initiation Society, with the Association of Reform and Liberal Mohelim, and with all the Jewish religious authorities.

In order to perform its defence role Milah UK monitors media coverage and campaigns against circumcision, maintains interfaith links on the matter (including with the Muslim community) and discusses issues relating to Milah with Jewish communities in other countries, where our processes and standards are often regarded as a model. Submissions are made to outside bodies that enquire about this topic, seeking to ensure that there are no misconceptions either about safety of the procedure itself, or about our right to perform it.

There are several organisations that are involved with Milah in the UK.