Care of the Uncircumcised Penis

What is the foreskin?
The penis has two main parts, the shaft and the head (called the glans). One continuous layer of skin, the foreskin, covers the shaft and glans. When a baby boy is circumcised, the foreskin covering the glans is removed. When a child is not circumcised the foreskin is firmly attached to the glans. Gradually, the foreskin will begin to separate from the glans of the penis. As this occurs you may notice a white, cheesy material called smegma release between the layers of skin. You also may see ‘white pearls’ develop under the fused layers of the foreskin and the glans. These are not signs of an infection or a cyst. Smegma is just skin cells that are shed throughout life. It is normal.

When will my son’s foreskin pull back (retract)?
When the foreskin separates from the glans of the penis it can be pulled back (retracted) away from the penis towards the abdomen to expose the glans of the penis. Some boys can retract their foreskin as early as age 5, but most may not be able to do this until their teenage years. Never forcibly retract your child’s foreskin. This can cause pain and bleeding and can lead to scarring and adhesions (where skin is stuck to skin).

As your son begins to toilet train, teach him how to retract his foreskin, this will get him used to this necessary step during urination. Eventually, the foreskin should be retracted far enough during urination to see the meatus (the hole where the urine comes from). This prevents urine from building up beneath the foreskin and possibly causing an infection.

How do I clean the foreskin?
As long as the foreskin doesn’t easily retract, only the outside needs to be cleaned. As you bathe your child with soap and water, wash the outer layers of his penis the same way. If your son’s foreskin retracts a little, just clean the exposed area of his glans with water. Don’t use soap on this area, as it can irritate the skin. After cleaning, always pull the foreskin back over the glans of the penis.

As your child gets older and the foreskin has completely separated and retracts easily, begin to teach him to clean underneath it as he bathes. At puberty, your son should be taught the importance of cleaning beneath the foreskin as part of his daily hygiene routine.

Is there anything I should watch for?
Even though your son’s foreskin is covering the glans of his penis, there is a hole large enough to allow for a normal stream as he urinates. If you notice that the hole is narrowing and your child’s foreskin “balloons” when he urinates notify your pediatrician. If your child’s foreskin becomes red, inflamed or painful notify your pediatrician.