The Tipping Point

Advocates rally around a radical circumcision study

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In December, the U.S. National Institutes of Health halted circumcision trials in Kenya and Uganda—even though preliminary results showed the procedure reduced chances of HIV infection through heterosexual sex by 50%. The study required one group of participants to remain uncircumcised, so researchers deemed it unethical to continue and offered all subjects free procedures. “Circumcision is a one-time-only intervention that lasts [a man’s] entire life,” says lead researcher Robert Bailey, PhD. Headlines dubbing it a proven HIV-prevention method soon blanketed the globe. However, Bailey warns that circumcision merely offers another mode of harm reduction, not guaranteed protection. “Still use condoms,” he says, “try to be faithful, and know your status.” Also, a circumcision can be easily botched when not performed by medical professionals using sterilized tools. Transmission vulnerability actually increases if patients do not heal properly. Such risks are higher in developing nations, where condoms are often culturally challenged, if they’re even available. The unkindest cut of all?

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