Female Genital Cutting (FGC) ‘comprises of all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons’¹. It is also known as female genital mutilation (FGM) or circumcision.

It is estimated that 100–140 million women and girls world-wide have undergone the practice of FGC with approximately three million girls and women subjected to the practice each year². It is usually performed on girls under the age of 15.

Women and girls who are subjected to FGC are exposed to short and long-term effects on their physical, psychological, sexual and reproductive health. It is a form of discrimination and is recognised internationally as a harmful traditional practice that strongly violates the human rights of women and girls.

Approximately 62% of girls and women from practicing countries believe that FGC is wrong and needs to stop³.

**LEGISLATION AND FGC**

Australia and many other countries have passed laws which make all forms of FGC illegal. FGC is prohibited by law in all states and territories of Australia, with penalties of up to 20 years of imprisonment. In December 1996, the Victorian Government passed legislation that prohibits FGC in all its forms. It is also illegal to take a child or a person to another country outside Australia to circumcise them.

**VALUES AND BELIEFS UNDERPINNING THE PRACTICE**

There are many cultural values and beliefs attached to the practice of FGC:

**SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE** An uncircumcised woman and her family risk community disapproval including being socially ostracised and facing insults, harassment or rejection.

**CLEANLINESS** FGC is thought to preserve good hygiene, maintain chastity and keep girls pure.

**BETTER MARRIAGE PROSPECTS** In countries where FGC is practiced, marriage is considered crucial, and sometimes the only source of income to women. An uncircumcised girl may be considered unmarriageable.

**ASSUMPTIONS** FGC is often believed to be a religious requirement, however it is a cultural, not a religious practice. It has no scriptural basis in either Islam or Christianity.

**COMING OF AGE RITUAL** Some communities use the practice to signify girls becoming adults.

**CONTROL** The practice is believed to control or restrain a women’s sexual behaviour and therefore maintain purity. It is important to remember that FGC is a harmful traditional practice with no health benefits.
WHERE IS FGC PRACTICED?

FGC is commonly practiced in parts of Africa as shown in the map below. It is also known to be practised in some communities in the Middle Eastern countries of Yemen, Jordan, Oman and Saudi Arabia, and among some groups in Asia from Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Pakistan\(^5\,6\,8,7\). In Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and Europe, immigrants from practicing communities may have already undergone the practice or are considered to be at risk of continuing the practice\(^8,8\).

PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS AND WOMEN AGED 15 TO 19 YEARS WHO HAVE UNDERGONE FGC BY COUNTRY

AGE AT WHICH FGC IS PERFORMED

The age at which FGC is performed varies from community to community. It can be performed on girls as young as seven days old, right through to puberty. In some communities the procedure may be delayed until just before marriage or after the birth of the first child.
TYPES OF FGC

NATURAL VULVAL APPEARANCE
Example of external female genitalia without cutting

TYPE 1
Involves the partial or total removal of the clitoris.

TYPE 2
Involves the partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia without removal of the labia majora.

TYPE 3
Involves the total removal of the clitoris and the whole of the labia majora and minora.

TYPE 3 CONTINUED
This is the most severe type of FGC and is also called Infibulation. It is the most common form of FGC practised in the Horn of Africa. The two sides of the labia are stitched together and a small opening is left to allow for urination and the flow of menstrual blood.

TYPE 4
This includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, including pricking, piercing, scraping, incising and cauterising.
IMPACT ON WOMEN AND GIRLS HEALTH

FGC has no health benefits and is internationally recognised as a violation of human rights. FGC can have adverse long-term effects on physical and mental health and wellbeing.¹

IMMEDIATE COMPLICATIONS FGC can result in immediate complications including shock, severe bleeding, bacterial infections, tetanus, septicaemia, urine retention and damage to the urethra or anus.

LONG TERM COMPLICATIONS Ongoing complications can include scarring, vulvar abscesses and cysts, menstrual complications, urinary and kidney infections, chronic pelvic infection, chronic pain, infertility and difficulty during gynaecological examinations or surgery. Girls can also be psychologically affected by the trauma of having FGC performed on them. Women who have undergone FGC can find sexual intercourse painful and traumatic, and experience difficulty with penetration and decreased sexual enjoyment.

PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH PROBLEMS FGC can lead to an increased risk of childbirth complications including mother and newborn deaths.

FGC SUPPORT SERVICES

ROYAL WOMEN’S HOSPITAL FGC SUPPORT WORKERS AND DE-INFIBULATION CLINIC

The Royal Women’s Hospital, Well Women’s Clinic provides a free, confidential service for women who have had FGC. They offer de-infibulation services (de-infibulation is a surgical procedure to reverse type 3 FGC and may be performed prior to or during pregnancy or childbirth). The service is available to pregnant and non-pregnant women. Women using this service will be treated by experienced women’s health nurses.

Well Women’s Clinic and De-infibulation Clinic Bookings: (03) 8345 3037

The hospital also has FGC support workers who can provide cultural support and advocacy to women affected by FGC and their families: (03) 8345 3058

WOMEN’S HEALTH IN THE NORTH

WHIN provides education for women who originate from countries where FGC is traditionally practiced and health professionals who may work with these women.