

## Boys and Their Hoods

Two guys take personal growth to the extreme in a quest to bring foreskins to the fore.

By [Chris LaMorte](#)

Paul Russo is feeling like his old self again. Sure, it took a year's worth of pulling, yanking, stretching, a few rolls of surgical tape and the help of assorted homemade contraptions, but he finally did it. The once-circumcised Russo has regrown his foreskin.

Don't believe it? Just look at his home page on the Web. Russo, who provides online technical support for a small Boulder software firm, has documented the enhancement of his penile profile during the past year in a series of black-and-white photographs and posted them on the Internet for all to see. The results have even impressed one prominent Denver urologist.

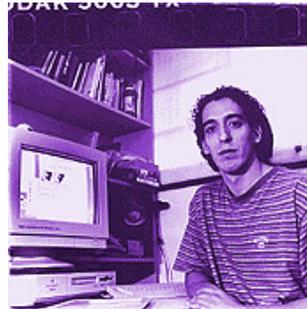
But now that he's done it, the question is why? Russo is part of a growing contingent of foreskin advocates who are using the Internet not only to spread their anti-circumcision message but to demonstrate that even long after that little piece of seemingly insignificant skin is tossed into the hospital's medical-waste incinerator, all is not lost.

"I'm doing this because it was something I had, something I was entitled to and that was taken away from me," says the 31-year-old Boulderite. "When I found out that there was something I could do about it, I had to try. It was robbed from me. I just wanted it back."

The Web site that Russo created includes pictures of his penis during the last year, information about why he's doing this and a diary of his highs and lows. In one emotionally charged entry, he writes: "March 8, 1996: When I started to pee, I felt something that I had never felt before, something intact guys probably feel every day. I felt the warmth of the urine fill the space under the skin for an instant...I was overwhelmed by a sense of loss."

Russo's story of loss and regeneration has made him a star among online foreskin fans. However, another local Web site, Derrick Townsend's Foreskin Restoration Site, a step-by-step guide to foreskin regeneration that taught Russo how to recapture his full manhood, is one of the most-talked-about Web pages on the topic. Townsend (a pseudonym he uses on the site) has received hundreds of thousands of hits on his extensive, well-organized guide.

Like most American men, Townsend, 33, was circumcised as a newborn. At first his young mother, who'd never seen



Growing pains: Paul Russo says he's regenerated his foreskin because he was "robbed."

Photo by James Bludworth



[Paul's foreskin diary](#)

[Derrick Townsend's Foreskin Restoration site.](#)

[CIRP Circumcision Information Resource Pages.](#)

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an uncut penis, thought her son was deformed and wanted the situation "resolved," he says.

Townsend, who says he has always been "fascinated" by foreskins, first became aware of the idea of restoring his own through a local gay and lesbian electronic bulletin board that had a discussion area on the topic.

His initial attempt at foreskin regrowth involved taping tiny weights to his penis to lengthen the skin around the glans head, a technique culled from the bulletin board. That experiment ended shortly after the traumatic experience of having the weights slip down his pant leg at work and fall on the floor in front of a customer, says Townsend, who now works for an Internet development company.

He later joined an electronic mailing list detailing various foreskin-reconstruction methods. That's how he discovered the T-tape and Strap method of foreskin extension. Townsend found the instructions for this method confusing, so he decided to start a site to clarify them.

The method he illustrates--with the help of an immodest cyberpal who donated pictures of his own penis going through the rigmarole--is enough to make most men squirm. It involves placing a good deal of surgical tape (shaped in the form of a T) around the remnants of the foreskin, clipping a suspender to the end of the tape and pulling. The suspender is then tightly fastened around the waist (or around the neck during bedtime). Townsend and Russo, who know each other only through e-mail, have both used this method to regrow their foreskin.

For the system to work, the tension must be nearly continual. Russo has worn his T-tape and strap for as long as 23 hours a day for more than a year and is not finished yet. The tape is a hassle, says Russo, but he's become adept at discreetly slipping it off at the gym and working around it in the men's room. "I sit down a lot," he explains.

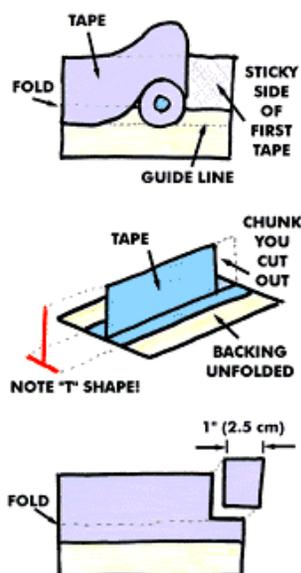
The tension encourages new skin cells to grow and lengthens the skin around the penis. The idea of "stretching" the skin is based on methods doctors use to generate new skin for burn victims.

The new skin is not a foreskin, per se, since it lacks the nerve endings lost during circumcision. However, it does create what Russo describes as a "warm little cocoon," allowing the penis to hide from the abrasive world of underwear, jock straps and bedsheets.

The photo diary of Russo's progress makes a compelling argument that foreskin regeneration is "not just witchcraft or smoke and mirrors," says Townsend.

Dr. Martin Koyle, professor of surgery and urology at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and chief of pediatric urology at Children's Hospital, calls Russo's and Townsend's home pages "amazing." Koyle, who

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**Internet tips:**  
Derrick Townsend's site illustrates how to make the T-tape and strap.

performs routine circumcision on newborns, does not advocate its practice as a medical necessity. He receives about three calls a year from men who are interested in restoring their foreskins through surgery, says Koyle, but surgical methods of foreskin reconstruction have been almost entirely unsuccessful. The benefits that Townsend and Russo tout are likely attributable to the psychology of sex rather than the physiology of the penis, Koyle says, but he adds that they are benefits nonetheless.

For his part, Russo says he's already realized those benefits. "I don't feel like the same person," he says. "It's so sensitive. I always thought I was enjoying sex as much as anyone could enjoy sex, but of course, I had nothing to compare it to."

Russo, however, says he still feels a sense of loss because the nerve endings are irrevocably gone. "It may look like a foreskin and act like a foreskin," he says, "but it doesn't feel like one."

Townsend says the value for him is mainly cosmetic, though he says there has been physical improvement as well.

Many people probably think Russo and Townsend are making a big flap over practically nothing. Forget the fact that, according to quite a few people, the foreskin enhances penile sensitivity. To most, the foreskin is viewed as an affront to nature itself, perhaps akin to hair in a woman's armpit. Indeed, the presence of a foreskin can be blamed for many a high school locker-room pummeling.

Routine male circumcision in America began in the 1870s as an attempted cure for masturbation, which at the time was believed to be the cause of many maladies, according to John Bigelow, author of *The Joy of Uncircumcising*, a seminal work in foreskin restoration. Traveling medicine shows would often offer men a quick clip to go with their patented "cure-all" tonics. By the late 1920s, the excuse of preventive medicine had caught on. By then, the medical establishment had rejected the idea that masturbation caused disease, but Bigelow says the foreskin remained "villainized." Circumcision, doctors believed, could prevent everything from venereal disease to penile cancer.

By 1940, American doctors regularly circumcised newborn males. Today the United States remains the only country in which most doctors routinely circumcise for non-religious reasons. It's estimated that 75 percent of American males are circumcised shortly after birth. Nations such as Canada, Germany, France and England have newborn-circumcision rates of about 5 percent, according to Koyle.

Studies in the Eighties demonstrated that 95 percent of bladder and kidney infections among infants were found in uncircumcised males, lending weight to the belief that circumcision was beneficial. However, doctors like Koyle are skeptical. "The question becomes: Do you circumcise

500 boys to prevent one infection?" he says. "To me, that's overkill."

Koyle points out that circumcision is far from risk-free. One in 5,000 babies suffers acute complications from the procedure, he says, and treatment for these complications are more dangerous than the treatment for infections that often accompany foreskin. One of the most horrifying cases of a complication occurred in the late Eighties when a Georgia boy's circumcision was so badly botched that the parents and doctor agreed to perform a sex change on the six-month-old.

Still, the idea that if it was good enough for dad, it's good enough for junior keeps circumcision alive. People like Bigelow, Russo and Townsend believe the question about foreskin is one of basic human rights. Though none believe that male circumcision is as brutal as some forms of female circumcision that include removal of the minor labia, all still contend that it's genital mutilation.

"I feel the same about it as if I were an infant and someone cut off my hand," says Russo. "That would be child abuse. But with circumcision, everyone says that, oh, it's no big deal. You're just obsessed with your penis. But to me, it's the same issue." ■

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