

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is also known as female genital cutting, female circumcision or initiation. FGM is a collective term used for a range of practices involving the removal or alteration of parts of healthy female genitalia for non-therapeutic (non-medical) reasons. FGM is a form of violence against women and girls and as such, it is against UK law to undertake or arrange FGM either within the UK or abroad.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a deeply rooted tradition, widely practised mainly among specific ethnic populations in Africa and parts of the Middle East and South East Asia. It serves as a complex form of social control of women's sexual and reproductive rights.

Common reasons for FGM generally relate to tradition, inequalities of power and ensuring compliance of girls and women to the dictates of their communities. Family members frequently condone FGM to conform to social norms and women may see their own FGM as necessary to ensure marriageability and acceptance by their community.

FGM has no health benefits and harms women and girls in many ways; both emotionally and physically. The practice involves removing and/or mutilating healthy and normal female genital tissue; interfering with the natural function of women and girls' bodies.

FGM causes severe pain and has immediate health risks as well as short term and long term consequences, including difficulties in childbirth which can also create risk for the baby. The age at which the practice is carried out varies, from shortly after birth to the labour of the first child, depending on the community or individual family. The most common age is between four and ten, although it appears to be falling.

FGM is illegal in the UK. Its prevalence is hard to estimate given the 'hidden' nature of the crime. However, recent studies indicate that significant numbers of women and girls living in the UK are living with the consequences of FGM and that many may be at risk.

The following factors might indicate that a girl is at increased risk of undergoing FGM:

- If FGM is practiced in the girl or woman's country of origin.
- The family is not integrated into UK society.
- If the girl's mother has had FGM.
- If the girl's sister or other girls in the extended family has had FGM.

Suspicious may arise that a family is making arrangements for a child/young person to be taken abroad for the purpose of undergoing FGM. For example:

- Arranging vaccinations.
- Planning absences from school.
- The child is talking about a "special procedure" taking place.

You may need to gather further information to assess the level of risk prior to referral, but it is vital that you only share the specific nature of your concern with professionals aware of the need to handle such information appropriately, so as not to increase the level of risk to the child/young person.

You might identify that a girl or woman has undergone genital mutilation through disclosure by the individual or another, or by observing the following:

Difficulty walking, sitting or standing; frequent urinary or menstrual problems; and a reluctance to undergo medical examinations – for example, colposcopy. A teenager may ask for help, but may not be explicit about the problem due to embarrassment or fear; reports of child spending longer than normal time in the bathroom or toilet due to difficulties urinating.

Government multi-agency guidelines stipulate that ‘the examination of a child or young person should be in accordance with local safeguarding children procedures and should normally be carried out by a consultant paediatrician’.

Suffolk children are seen at [The Ferns](#) SARC in Ipswich and Social Care will assess any risk to other females or children within the extended family.

Raising Concerns

In Suffolk, children/young people suspected to be at risk of, or suspected to have undergone FGM, should be referred using the same pathway as used for Child Sexual Abuse through the MASH. A referral should be made to Customer First in the same way as any other case of suspected child abuse, by calling 0808 800 4005.

You will not need consent from the family/carer to make this referral. You would usually be open and honest with the family/carer about your concerns and why you were making the referral, however where children/young people may be placed at increased risk if the family are aware of concerns, the referral should be made covertly. In FGM cases there may be coercion and control involved, which could have serious repercussions for the girls or women in the family.

The MASH will assess the level of risk. Although FGM is illegal, families are not likely to intend it as an act of abuse and believe it to be in the girl’s best interests; it may not always be appropriate to remove the child from an otherwise nurturing home environment. Children’s Services will aim to work with the family to prevent the child undergoing FGM.

If the child is deemed at immediate risk, Social Care may seek to remove the child using the powers of Police Protection or by applying to the courts for an Emergency Protection Order.

Adult Women and FGM: Safeguarding Families

When a woman who has undergone FGM gives birth to a daughter, she should be provided with clear information that FGM is illegal in the UK and should not be performed on her daughter. It is important that this is done in a sensitive manner as the woman may have been a victim of enforced FGM and may be distressed at the suggestion that she would do the same to her daughter. **Clear record keeping and inter-agency information sharing will be essential to allow identification of future children at potential risk of FGM.**

All girls or women who have undergone FGM should be offered counselling to address how things will be different for them afterwards. Boyfriends, partners and husbands should also be offered counselling as appropriate.

There are several NHS clinics in London and other large UK cities, offering specialist health services including corrective surgery. A list of FGM health services can be found on the [NHS Choices](#) website.

Practice Guidance & Resources

Government: [Multi-Agency Statutory Guidance on Female Genital Mutilation \(April 2016\)](#)

[FORWARD](#) - Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development

[Orchid Project](#) and [Daughters of Eve](#) - non-profit organisations working to protect girls and young women at risk of FGM.

Further information about Female Genital Mutilation, including Guidance for Health Professionals, Multi-Agency Statutory Guidance, booklets and posters, can be found on the LSCB website. www.suffolkscb.org.uk.