

What is female genital mutilation? Female genital mutilation (FGM) is any procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs and is often performed on girls between the ages of 4 and 14 to ensure their virginity until marriage. FGM has no foundation in Islamic scripture or law; however, in the West it is mainly practiced in Muslim communities.

Is female genital mutilation harmful? Yes. The World Health Organization reports that FGM has no health benefits and can cause a number of health problems. Immediately following the procedure, girls are at risk for severe pain, shock, bleeding, bacterial infection, and injury to nearby tissue. In the long term, girls and women who have suffered this procedure are at risk for recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections, cysts, infertility, and complications during intercourse and childbirth.

Is female genital mutilation practiced in the United States? Because this is a private ritual that occurs within the secrecy of the family, there is no way of knowing exactly how prevalent FGM is in the U.S. There have been few reported cases of FGM being performed in the U.S.; however, numerous authorities suspect that the actual numbers are far higher. There is also a concern that families send their daughters out of the country to suffer the procedure.

Research conducted by the African Women’s Health Center of the Brigham and Women’s Hospital found that approximately 228,000 women and girls in the U.S. have either suffered the procedure or are at risk of FGM, a number that increased by approximately 35% between 1990 and 2000.

Is female genital mutilation a crime? Yes, FGM has been a crime under federal law since 1996 and is punishable by up to five years in prison. It is not a crime to take your daughter abroad to undergo the procedure.

FGM is also a crime in the following 19 states:

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| California | Colorado | Delaware | Florida |
| Georgia | Illinois | Maryland | Minnesota |
| Missouri | Nevada | New York | North Dakota |
| Oklahoma | Oregon | Rhode Island | Tennessee |
| Texas | West Virginia | Wisconsin | |

However, in many states where FGM is a crime, the sentencing provisions are quite weak. For example, in New York, a person convicted of FGM may avoid a prison sentence and receive only a sentence of probation.