

Two more babies stricken with HERPES after ritual oral blood sucking circumcision in New York City

- **Since 2000 13 known cases of herpes have been contracted from the religious practice**
- **Two deaths and two babies suffering brain damage have resulted**
- **Department of health warns there being no safe way to perform the ritual that dates back more than 5,000 years**

By Nina Golgowski

Two more infants have been infected with a deadly herpes virus in the last three months after undergoing a controversial religious oral circumcision in New York City.

The latest cases bring the count to 13 infants since 2000, two of which suffered brain damage and two died from the virus which can rapidly spread throughout its body.

The ultra-Orthodox practice of metzitzah b'peh requires a practitioner to orally suck the baby's penis to 'cleanse' the open wound following its circumcision, making them susceptible to the virus.



Contraction: The ultra-Orthodox practice of metzitzah b'peh requires a practitioner to orally suck the baby's penis to 'cleanse' the open wound following its circumcision, making them susceptible to the virus (file photo)

The department of health says one of the latest infants to contract the virus developed a fever and a lesion on its scrotum, seven days after the procedure. The boy later tested positive for HSV-1. That virus differs from HSV-2, the genital herpes, which is contracted during sexual intercourse.

'A herpes infection in a newborn baby has the risk of leading to severe illness and death,' Jay Varma, deputy commissioner for disease control at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene told [ABC News](#).

'The reason is that the baby doesn't have the same fully developed immune system as an adult. Instead of staying in the genital area, it extends throughout different organs in the body,' he explained.

He said it's too soon to tell whether the boys will suffer permanent effects.

The identity of the rabbi who performed the circumcision is being withheld by the boys' parents, preventing the health department to step in, they said.



Dangers: Since 2000 13 known cases of herpes have resulted from the practice, two of which suffered brain damage and two others died.

The religious practice that dates back to more than 5,000 years defies warning by the city's department of health which says there is no safe way to perform the oral suction on an open wound. More modern Jewish practices use a sterile aspiration device to clean the wound or a pipette opposed to the oral sucking.

But some rabbis stand grounded behind the practice, calling it a religious freedom while noting its long history.

In September the department voted to require parents to sign forms consenting to the risks of the practice after the death of two children who contracted the virus through the practice.

The parents of those newly infected boys are said to have not signed those forms.

According to Rabbi David Zwiebel, executive vice president of the Orthodox Jewish organization Agudath Israel of America, two-thirds of boys born in New York City's Hasidic communities are circumcised in the oral suction matter.

The health department claims they've had complaints in past by parents who say they weren't made aware that the oral practice would be performed on their child.