

# Testicles

## Castration

Castration is a multivalent term, which in the broadest sense can refer to almost any amputation of genital tissue, but which normally refers to the removal of testicles in men. Here the latter definition is used, although several other important usages are mentioned. The traditional term for men who have been castrated is “eunuch,” and it remains in use among scholars, particularly when discussing history. Today, castrated men do not refer to themselves as eunuchs, as the term has become pejorative.

## Medicine and Sexuality

In contemporary Western medicine, surgical castration (orchietomy and orchidectomy) is performed as a treatment for testicular and advanced prostate cancer. For treating prostate cancer, the procedure was first described in 1941. It reduces testosterone levels by 95 percent, and is remarkably effective at stopping cancerous growth. Today, such surgery can be done as an outpatient procedure with local anesthesia. An incision is made along the midline of the scrotum (where the scar will blend with the natural line of the perineal raphe) or above the penis shaft (where the scar will be concealed by hair). The surrounding connective tissues are cut to expose the testicles one at a time, the spermatic cord is tied to prevent bleeding, the testicles are severed and extracted, and the wound is sewn closed. Should a patient wish, prosthetic testicles can be inserted into the scrotum. Such prostheses make some men feel whole again, or please patients for their ability to create the illusion of intact genitals. The first prostheses were used in 1941, and were made from the alloy vitallium. Glass, Lucite, Gelfoam, polyethylene, polyester, saline-filled bags, solid silicone rubber, and silicone gel in a silicone rubber shell also have been used. Implants containing silicone gel are the most lifelike, but are controversial because the material causes health risks for women when used as breast implants. (Medical data on ruptured testicular prostheses is too scant to assess safety—as of 2002, only five cases had been reported, often caused by pressure through bike racing, horse jumping, or fetishistic sex.)

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The surgical procedure has been declining in frequency, as castration by drugs that suppress hormones have become more popular. This suppression can be accomplished with drugs that block hormone reception, hormone production, or control the hypothalamus and pituitary glands. Taken together, surgical and drug therapies are referred to as androgen-deprivation therapy. More than 40,000 men in North America start such therapy each year. While drug therapy avoids the psychological difficulty of having one's "manhood" disappear, surgery is simpler, cheaper, and more convenient. A drawback of drug therapy is that patients often forget or refuse to take their medications. After either form, men experience menopausal-like symptoms, such as hot flashes, fatigue, nausea, indigestion, enlarged or tender breasts, weight gain, sweating, weakness, impotence, change of skin and hair texture, osteoporosis, anemia, depression, loss of libido, and glucose intolerance.

The sexuality of castrated men is poorly understood. Although castration usually reduces the libido, many men retain desire, particularly if castrated after puberty. Although estimates vary widely, upward of 25 percent retain a sex drive. They may not have erections with predictability, but can engage in a panoply of other sexual and sensual practices with their partners. In some societies, eunuchs have been thought of as a third sex because their bodies have secondary-sex characteristics of both men and women. Castration is also one of the surgical procedures performed on male-to-female transsexuals, and indeed castrated men in many cultures worldwide have functioned as women or a third gender. As such, castration may be sexually liberating, allowing eunuchs to have relationships with both genders and explore socially taboo pleasures.

A little studied subculture of men who want to be or have already been castrated has emerged in contemporary society, primarily on the Internet. The average age of participants within the subculture is sixty, and the majority of the men are college-educated. The reasons for seeking out castration are manifold, but about 40 percent desire a "eunuch calm," 30 percent are sexually excited by the idea, and another 30 percent find castration aesthetically pleasing. The culture centers around Web sites such as *The Eunuch Archive* (<http://www.eunuch.org>) and *Body Modification E-zine* (<http://www.bmezine.org>). Because of the difficulty of finding medical personnel to castrate a healthy man, the community often resorts to self-mutilation and dangerous "street cutters." Unfortunately, these procedures often go badly, resulting in the need for professional medical attention.

Castration has been an important concept in psychiatry since Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) proposed in 1925 that boys developed "castration anxiety" after seeing female genitals, intuitively believing that their penis was cut off. Freud incorrectly believed that girls do not experience vaginal pleasure until after puberty, so they also fixate on their lack of a penis, developing "penis envy." Although Freud's central idea about males has retained professional respect, psychiatrists Melanie Klein (1882–1960) and Ernest Jones (1879–1958) pointed out that his ideas reduced females' experiences to a mirror of males' and proposed a more nuanced understanding of the psychosexual development of girls.

### *Myth and Religion*

Both the practice and condemnation of castration are featured in the world's major mythological and religious systems. In Greek and Roman mythology, Cybele, a goddess of fertility, had a male partner, Attis, who castrated himself. As early as 415 BCE this served as a foundation for a cult of priests called the Galli, who dedicated themselves to Cybele after performances that culminated in ritual castration. The cult was unwelcome in Greece, but was received well in Rome, where temples were located. Like Attis, the Galli wore female clothing. Although the symbolism is poorly understood, by castrating themselves the priests may have strengthened Attis for his resurrection or become more similar to Cybele, to whom they were devoted.

Within the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, castration has been treated in numerous ways. Castration has always been prohibited within the Jewish faith. Passages from the scriptures refer to this, including Deuteronomy 23:1, Leviticus 21:20, and 22:24 (New Revised Standard Version). Specifically, no man "whose testicles are crushed," may "be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." Also, no animal with "its testicles ... crushed or torn or cut" could be sacrificed. Later interpretation in the Talmud extended this prohibition to include any purposeful impairment to the reproductive systems. At the same time, Isaiah prophesied that, "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who ... hold fast my covenant, [the Lord] will give ... a monument and a name better than sons and daughters ..." (56:3-5). There are medical exceptions made to the Jewish laws.

Historically, Christianity has been ambivalent about castration. The Roman Catholic Church at various occasions condemned self-castration, such as at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE and a decree by Pope Leo I in 395 CE. Nevertheless, Jesus is reported to have taught: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matthew 19:12). In 203 CE, Origen (185–254 CE), one of the church fathers, reportedly castrated himself because of this passage, but later another father, Augustine (354–430 CE), forcefully condemned the practice. Augustine argued that Jesus allegorically meant that Christians should abstain from marriage. Due to the competitive religious culture at the time, Augustine and others may have been setting Christianity up against what they considered to be pagan religions, including the cult of Cybele. Also, a religion requiring mutilation would understandably attract fewer adherents—this may have been the reason why the apostle Paul taught against circumcision of new Christian converts, a practice found in Judaism. Interestingly, possibly the first gentile convert to Christianity may have been a eunuch; a court official from ancient Ethiopia was converted by Philip in the book of Acts (8:26-40).

The positive treatment of eunuchs within Christianity is demonstrated by their consistent welcome in membership, their ability to be ordained if involuntary castrated, and their importance in church music. The castrati were men who were castrated before puberty and prized for their voices as adults. Such early castration slows the development of the vocal cords and larynx,

resulting in a vocal range, castrati were rare. Although the castrati as professionals within Western Europe in the early 17th century from the fifteenth century during the sixteenth century (1685–1759) calling for castration. Broschi (17th century) movie by the high fees, he declined. T. (1861), who

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resulting in high voices, an unusual vocal tone quality, sometimes a wider  
 vocal range, and a larger breathing capacity. As church music developed, castrati  
 were necessary due to the prohibition of women's voices in church.  
 Although the church condemned castration, it paradoxically justified the castrati  
 as promoting the public welfare with good music. Castrati were used  
 within Western churches beginning in the late sixteenth century and ending  
 in the early twentieth; eunuchs were present within the eastern churches  
 from the fifth century. Castrati were also featured in opera, primarily in Italy  
 during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Composers such as Handel  
 (1685–1759), Mozart (1756–1791), and Rossini (1792–1868) composed music  
 calling for castrati voices. One of the most famous of castrati was Carlo  
 Broschi (1705–1782), known as Farinelli, on whom an award-winning 1994  
 movie by the same name is based. During their apex, castrati could command  
 high fees, but the form of opera in which castrati parts were composed  
 declined. The last operatic castrato was Giovanni Battista Velluti (1780–  
 1861), who retired in 1830.

As definitively as it is in Judaism, castration is forbidden in Islam;  
 Mohammad forbid both self-castration and castration of others. This did not  
 prevent Muslim rulers, however, from hiring physicians of different religious  
 traditions to perform the procedure on their subjects; importing eunuchs  
 from Africa, India, and elsewhere; employing them as palace and harem  
 guards and in the military; and sending them as gifts. Eunuchs have been  
 documented within Islamic empires as early as the Abbasid caliphate (750–  
 1258 CE). Eunuchs even guarded Muhammad's tomb in Medina, a practice  
 that ended in the 1920s; these were the last eunuchs under Islamic rule.

In China, castration was practiced from at least the eighth century BCE to  
 1911 CE. Although religion in China is difficult to generalize because of the  
 varying practices and hybridization of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism,  
 eunuchs were often equated with deformity. They were permitted to enter  
 temples but denied access to the altars of main deities. Because sterile men  
 do not have descendants, it was difficult to ensure living caretakers for their  
 souls. A common strategy to prevent this problem was to become a monk, as  
 the community would ensure proper postmortem ritual. Such rejection of cas-  
 tration was also present in Chinese secular society. Eunuchs were despised by  
 many and insulted for their odor if they were incontinent.

The eunuchs themselves were allowed to enter the Forbidden City and of-  
 ten attained political power as civilians with direct access to the royal family.  
 Within the harem quarters, they served as guards, companions, and musi-  
 cians. Princes were raised by eunuchs. As such, castrated men had the oppor-  
 tunity to mold the character of future emperors. The most powerful eunuchs  
 in China were castrated as boys—sold by their families for service in the pal-  
 ace—but grown men could volunteer to be castrated for employment. Those  
 under age ten were permitted the most intimate access to the harem, includ-  
 ing bathing. For adults, the privilege of castration required testimony of good  
 character, and although employment tasks were menial, the pay was high.

In China, castration included the removal of the penile shaft as well as the  
 testicles, and unlike most parts of the world, documentation exists on the pro-  
 cedure. An account by the nineteenth-century Englishman George Carter

Stent explained that the patient was given an anesthetic drink and the genitals were numbed with pepper. The testicles and shaft were severed with a curved knife, the urethra plugged with metal, and paper bandages applied over the wound. After three days, during which the patient could not drink, the bandages were removed to allow urination. Full recovery took up to three months, and the procedure proved fatal for 2 percent of patients. The penis was saved in a jar of alcohol and inspected before professional promotions—if lost, a replacement could be purchased or borrowed. Upon death, a eunuch was buried with his penis. The last Chinese royal eunuch, Sun Yaoting, died in 1996—eighty-five years after the fall of the imperial government.

Although not technically castration because it refers to the severance of the penile shaft, the “vagina dentata” or “toothed vagina”—an orifice that bites off any penis that penetrates it—is a common myth worldwide. Forms of the myth appear in Native American, Indian, Maori, Hawaii, Greenland, Greek, and Christian cultures. In recent years, technologies used by women to simulate the vagina dentata have appeared in popular culture, such as the science fiction novel *Snow Crash* from 1992 by Neal Stephenson, actualized in 2005 as the “Rapex”—a latex tube worn like a tampon, filled with needle-like barbs that would require surgical removal. The vagina dentata was of particular interest among avant-garde artists such as Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)—sometimes shown as the female praying mantis who eats the male after copulating. Although completely unfounded, according to lore among American troops during the Vietnam War, local women inserted razor blades, shards of glass, sand, or other items into their vaginas as an insurgency technique, in effect realizing the myth.

### **Punishment**

Castration has been used as a form of punishment for centuries, usually for sexual crimes or as a means to debase one’s enemies. It was punishment for adultery in ancient Egypt, for rape in twelfth-century Western Europe, and for homosexuality in thirteenth-century France. Some evidence suggests prisoners of war were castrated in Europe during the Middle Ages. Even today, men reportedly have been castrated and left to die in the Sudanese Darfur conflict.

Castration as a form of punishment is rare or prohibited in developed countries. In the United States, the Supreme Court decided in 1910 in the case *Weems v. United States* that castration was “barbaric,” although, in at least one state, California, a person convicted of child molestation can be castrated either chemically or physically. Sex offenders in the Federal Republic of Germany during the 1970s could choose castration in exchange for sentence reduction. A famous study (1989) by Reinhard Wille and Klaus M. Beier showed that 3 percent of those who chose surgical castration offended again, versus a rate of 46 percent for those who had chosen castration but later changed their minds. Sex offenders in some U.S. states are now chemically castrated, meaning that they are given medication to reduce the sex drive as a way to prevent recidivism. These drugs can be effective, but the number of sex offenders with abnormal sexual drives and fantasies that would logically merit such treatment

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**For Further Imperial China.** Joel Wassersug. “Men Throughout Medicine 63 (2000) and Ethics of Cas Review Summer Urologic Prosthes and Patient Foll 2002; Faison, Setl ember 20, 1996; Distinction betwe Works of Sigmund Freud, 243–258. Own: A Cultural Carol Mitchell. “Nam War.” Weste agement of Newl ment of Prostat Jackson, Bruce. lore 84, no. 333 Middle Ages.” In age, eds., 279–30 and Castrating W E. *Eunuchs and Press, 1995; Mill Punishment?” In and Therapy, Br American Psycho ‘Immaculatus Ute no. 3 (1980): 41 Phenomenon.” *Ac Castration: An A Wassersug, Richa vation and Ratio (2004): 433–442; www.sfweekly.co M. Beier. “Castrat**

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is small, totaling some 10 percent of sex offenders. The American Psychiatric Association supports this chemical castration, but only after a clinical evaluation. Some contend the treatment may violate the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, since courts in the past have prohibited medicating prisoners against their will. The medications have side effects—the same as those described above for cancer treatment. Finally, some psychologists say the drugs do not address the emotional problems that lead to the sexual offenses. *See also* Penis: Penis Envy; and Testicles: Eunuchs in Antiquity.

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Travis Nygard and Alec Sonstebly

### Eunuchs in Antiquity

“Eunuch” is a term that has been used since Greco-Roman antiquity to describe partially and fully castrated males. In classical antiquity, partially