

# Oral Sex

## What you should know



Oral sex is rarely discussed in our society. But recent changes in our culture have made it important for you to know the facts. These changes include the on-going HIV/AIDS epidemic. Few scientific surveys have studied oral sex. There are indications that oral sex is on the rise, especially among middle school and high school aged children. Recent surveys show that over half of teenagers ages 15-19 report participating in oral sex.<sup>1</sup> An attitude is developing that, since you can't get pregnant through oral sex, then it must be "safe".<sup>2</sup>

As one Williamsburg, VA, eighth grade girl put it, "What's the big deal? President Clinton did it."<sup>3</sup>

Here are the facts. Judge for yourself whether it is a "big deal" or not. But first, let's define what we are talking about.

### What is oral sex?

Oral sex is the contact of one person's mouth or tongue with the genitals of another person.

### Is oral sex really sex?

There is a common, growing idea among young teens that oral sex isn't really sex. What they say is "real sex", or sexual intercourse, is technically called "coitus" (or vaginal sex - the penetration of the male genital into the female vagina). However, almost any dictionary also contains the secondary definition for sexual intercourse: "intercourse involving genital contact between individuals other than penetration of the vagina by the penis."<sup>4</sup> In other words, any genital contact is "sex". Oral sex really is sex.

### Am I still a virgin if I have oral sex?

The word virgin dates back to the 13th century and has had many meanings. At one time, it meant simply "an unmarried woman." Today, certainly one definition of a virgin is one who has not had sexual intercourse.<sup>5</sup> Sexual intercourse could include oral, anal and vaginal sex. Other people insist that the term "virgin" applies to anyone who hasn't had coitus. But maybe it's the next question that is the most important.

### Is oral sex "practicing abstinence"?

You hear so often that the only way to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is to practice sexual abstinence while you are single. What about oral sex? Here, the definition is clearer. Recent efforts to decrease teenage pregnancy and disease have resulted in "abstinence only" curriculum. "Abstinence" means "abstaining" from (not participating in) any sexual activity including oral, anal or vaginal sex or mutual masturbation. Anywhere genital contact is involved, a person is not practicing abstinence and puts themselves at risk.

### Is oral sex "safe sex"?

On this point, everyone agrees. Oral sex, like other methods of sex, carries with it the risk of serious, untreatable and even life-threatening diseases in both men and women. Oral sex has been found to spread syphilis, gonorrhea, HIV (HIV causes AIDS), HPV, genital herpes, chlamydia and possibly hepatitis C.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Below is an overview of some of these STDs.

### HPV - Human papillomavirus

This is a group of more than 100 different viruses. Most infections clear themselves. However, some HPV viruses are "high-risk" types, which may lead to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus or penis. About 20 million people are currently infected with HPV with 6.2 million new infections each year.<sup>9</sup> At least 50 percent of sexually active men and women will have genital HPV infection at some point in their lives. HPV spreads primarily through genital contact. Most HPV infections have no symptoms so most people are unaware they are infected. Some people get visible warts on the genitals that can spread to the mouth by oral sex. There may also be changes in cells

of the cervix, vulva, anus or penis that could lead to cancer. About 10 of the genital HPV types can lead to the development of cervical cancer. The American Cancer Society estimated that in 2005 in the United States, about 10,370 women would develop invasive cervical cancer and about 3,710 women would die from this disease.<sup>9</sup>

### Syphilis

In the U.S., over 33,400 cases of syphilis were reported in 2004.<sup>8</sup> Syphilis is passed by direct contact with sores that occur mainly on the genitals, vagina, anus, in the rectum or on the lips or in the mouth. Syphilis can spread during vaginal, anal or oral sex. Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, but are at risk for later complications if they are not treated.

During the primary stage of syphilis one or more sores appears. During the second stage, skin rash and mucous membrane lesions (wounds) occur. In the late stages, it may damage internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints. Syphilis can be cured in the early stages (infected less than a year) by a single injection of penicillin, but this cannot undo damage done before treatment.

### Gonorrhea

An estimated 700,000 people in the U.S. are infected each year.<sup>10</sup> Gonorrhea is spread through contact between the penis, vagina, mouth (oral sex) and anus. In the U.S., the highest rates are among sexually active teenagers, young adults and African Americans. Symptoms in men include a burning sensation when urinating or a white, yellow or green discharge from the penis. In women, the symptoms are often mild or absent.

Untreated gonorrhea can cause permanent health problems. In women, it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) with very severe abdominal pain, fever and long-lasting, chronic pelvic pain. PID can cause infertility or ectopic (tubal) pregnancy. In men, gonorrhea can cause a painful condition of the testicles that can lead to infertility if left untreated. Several antibiotics can cure gonorrhea, although drug resistant strains are developing world-wide.

## HIV/AIDS

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. This virus may be passed from one person to another through sexual and blood-to-blood contact. The estimated number of AIDS cases through 2004 in the U.S. is 944,306 with 529,113 deaths.<sup>11</sup>

The most common ways that HIV is transmitted from one person to another is by having anal or vaginal sex with an HIV-infected person. However, it can also be spread through oral sex. AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a disease caused by the HIV virus that weakens the immune system. It is a routinely fatal disease.

## Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 1 and 2. Type 1 is often associated with oral herpes infections, type 2 with genital herpes. However, the strains are now intermixed. Oral sex is an important risk factor for Type 1 infections.<sup>6</sup> Most people have few symptoms. Others have one or more blisters on or around the genitals or rectum. At least 45 million people ages 12 and older have had genital herpes infection (1 in 5 adolescents and adults). Most people infected with Type 2 are not aware of their infection. If symptoms do occur during the first outbreak, they can be quite pronounced. In many adults genital herpes can cause painful genital sores that reoccur. Worldwide, herpes may play a role in the spread of HIV.

## Chlamydia

Chlamydia can be spread during vaginal, anal or oral sex and can affect men and women. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her newborn during vaginal childbirth.

More than 929,400 cases were reported in 2004, with most of the people infected under the age of 25.<sup>10</sup> Many people have no symptoms. Some women might have an abnormal vaginal discharge or a burning when urinating. When the infection spreads, some women may have lower abdominal or back pain, nausea or fever.

Chlamydia can be treated and cured with antibiotics. If not treated, the infection can cause an infection called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) 10 to 40% of the time. PID can cause permanent damage to the fallopian tubes, uterus and tissues surrounding the ovaries. Chlamydia

may also increase the risk of acquiring HIV infection (HIV causes AIDS) from an infected partner.

## How Can STDs be Prevented?

The surest way to avoid infection with any sexually transmitted disease is to practice sexual abstinence (abstain from any sexual contact, including oral sex) while single. If you marry, select a partner who is not infected with an STD and remain sexually faithful during marriage.

One eighth grade boy who claimed 6 oral sex partners said, "I never thought I could get a disease. I knew these people."<sup>3</sup> Don't be ignorant. Know the facts.

## Sources and Resources

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