

## STIs & Oral Sex

### TRANSMISSION DURING ORAL SEX

It is possible for sexually transmitted infections (STIs, also called STDs) to be transmitted during unprotected oral sex. Oral sex is a much lower risk activity than intercourse, but there is still a possibility for transmission. Not using a condom, dental dam, or other barrier puts both partners at risk.

Herpes and gonorrhea are more likely to be transmitted during oral sex than other STIs. Herpes is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact with a developing or existing sore. The virus can be transmitted from mouth to genitals if the person giving oral sex has or is developing a cold sore. It can also be transmitted from genitals to mouth if the person receiving oral sex has or is developing a genital sore. Gonorrhea is transmitted when bacteria are present in body fluids. A person giving oral sex can get a gonorrhea infection of the throat if their partner has gonorrhea.

For the person receiving oral sex, there is little chance of contracting HIV, although it is difficult to pinpoint when HIV has been transmitted because people rarely engage in only one type of sexual activity. In the case of fellatio (oral sex on a man), the HIV virus theoretically could gain entry from the mouth to the opening on the tip of the penis, or through an open cut or lesion on the penis. However, saliva in the mouth has negligible concentrations of HIV so the risk is very low.

For the cunnilingus (oral sex on a woman) recipient, the chance of HIV transmission is also low, although the entire vagina is a mucous membrane through which, theoretically, the virus can be transmitted. A woman receiving cunnilingus is more at risk of getting herpes or gonorrhea from her partner than HIV.

The risk of HIV infection is greater for the partner who performs oral sex. A person performing oral sex on a woman should avoid it during her period, for menstrual blood can carry the HIV virus. Research presented at the 7th Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections in February of 2000 concluded that 8 of 122 cases in an HIV-transmission study were possibly attributable to performing oral sex on a man. Of these 8 infected people, some reported having had recent dental work or having cuts in their mouths, suggesting that HIV transmission by oral sex is associated with cuts, lesions, or irritation of the tissues in the mouth.

Other STIs that can be transmitted through oral sex, although less commonly, include HPV (Genital Warts), Hepatitis B, Syphilis, Chlamydia, and Chancroid.

### SYMPTOMS

If you have an oral STI infection, you might experience a sore throat, tonsillitis, oral lesions, or cold sores. However, many oral STI cases are asymptomatic. If your partner(s) is diagnosed with an STI, you should see a medical provider to be tested and possibly treated.

### TREATMENTS

Treatments vary based on the STI diagnosed and the severity of the case. For example, gonorrhea can be treated with antibiotics, but HIV cannot. Refer to the specific infection in the STI section to learn more about particular treatments.

### PREVENTION

You and your partner need to make decisions based on an understanding of the risks involved and respect for each other's comfort level. The safest choice is to use a latex barrier, such as a condom or dental dam, during every act of oral sex.

- Use a non-lubricated or a flavored condom. Spermicide condoms can numb the mouth and do not taste very good.
- Do not use food products like whipped cream or chocolate sauce with the condom or dental dam because they may be oil-based, and oil-based lubricants break down latex.
- For oral sex on a woman or for oral-anal stimulation, use a dental dam, use a plastic food wrap, or cut a condom lengthwise to make your own dental dam. Be sure to place the latex barrier over the entire vulva.

You have increased risk of being exposed to STIs in the following situations:

- You have gum disease, cuts or sores.
- You have had recent dental work that bruised any tissue in your mouth.
- You have vigorously brushed or flossed.

If you have any type of oral or genital piercing, avoid any type of oral sexual contact during the 6 weeks after the piercing even if you are in a mutually monogamous relationship. Until the site of the piercing is completely healed, the piercing is an open wound and provides easy access for bacteria and viruses.

### SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

The University Health Service (UHS) offers a full range of health care services for men and women. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider (PCP) by calling 275-2662. Women can also schedule an appointment with one of the women's health nurse practitioners. All visits to UHS are confidential.

### LINKS

*For more general information about the risks associated with oral sex and STIs, you can go to:*

Centers for Disease Control:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/faq/faq19.htm>