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How risky is oral sex?



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Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada.

Oral sex is the sucking or licking of someone's external genitalia (penis or vulva) or anus. Most experts agree that having unprotected oral sex is not as risky as having unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse. But oral sex is not risk free.

Unprotected oral sex is less risky than unprotected intercourse because the skin inside the mouth is stronger and thicker than the skin inside the vagina or anus.

The skin inside your mouth is less likely to tear during oral sex, allowing fewer opportunities for HIV to enter the bloodstream. Also, it is believed that there is a substance in saliva that actually inhibits HIV.

Remember, even though the risk is low for HIV transmission during oral sex with someone who is HIV positive or whose HIV status is not known, many other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including gonorrhoea, chlamydia and herpes, can be spread through unprotected oral sex.

Who is at risk?

Body fluids that can transmit HIV include pre-cum, semen, vaginal fluids and blood (including menstrual (period) blood). The receptive partner, the person performing the oral sex act, is at more risk than the insertive partner, the person being stimulated orally. This is due to the fact that the receptive partner comes into contact with more fluids that can transmit the infection.

What increases the risk of HIV getting into my bloodstream?

- if you have any cuts or sores in your mouth, even if they are unnoticeable (from disease, dental work, flossing, brushing or even from eating "sharp" foods like chips)
- if the skin in your mouth or on your partner's genitals is torn (even unnoticeably) during rough or prolonged oral sex (deep throating can cause abrasions in the back of the throat)
- if you have a throat infection or other STI.

How do I reduce the risk of getting or spreading HIV through oral sex?

- use an unlubricated latex condom (try flavoured condoms) for oral sex on a man
- use a dental dam (or a condom, cut lengthwise) for oral sex on a woman
- don't have oral sex right after brushing or flossing your teeth; wait at least 30 minutes
- try to avoid getting body fluids in your mouth
- after oral sex, rinse with water or an anti-bacterial mouthwash
- there's no evidence that spitting is more or less risky than swallowing—it is clear, however, that the longer infected fluids remain in the mouth, the more possible it is for infection to occur.

For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.

For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1
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Published by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, a program of the Canadian Public Health Association.
Revised and Updated March 2002.
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