

# Oral Sex and HIV Risk

CDC HIV/AIDS FACTS

JUNE 2009

## Oral Sex Is Not Risk Free

Like all sexual activity, oral sex carries some risk of HIV transmission when one partner is known to be infected with HIV, when either partner's HIV status is not known, and/or when one partner is not monogamous or injects drugs. Even though the risk of transmitting HIV through oral sex is much lower than that of anal or vaginal sex, **numerous studies have demonstrated that oral sex can result in the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**. Abstaining from oral, anal, and vaginal sex altogether or having sex only with a mutually monogamous, uninfected partner are the only ways that individuals can be completely protected from the sexual transmission of HIV. However, by using condoms or other barriers between the mouth and genitals, individuals can reduce their risk of contracting HIV or another STD through oral sex.

## Oral Sex is a Common Practice

Oral sex involves giving or receiving oral stimulation (i.e., sucking or licking) to the penis, the vagina, and/or the anus. Fellatio is the technical term used to describe oral contact with the penis. Cunnilingus is the technical term which describes oral contact with the vagina. Anilingus (sometimes called "rimming") refers to oral-anal contact. Studies indicate that oral sex is commonly practiced by sexually active male-female and same-gender couples of various ages, including adolescents. Although there are only limited national data about how often adolescents engage in oral sex, some data suggest that many adolescents who engage in oral sex do not consider it to be "sex," therefore they may use oral sex as an option to experience sex while still, in their minds, remaining abstinent. Moreover, many consider oral sex to be a safe or no-risk sexual practice. In a national survey of teens conducted for The Kaiser Family Foundation, 26% of sexually active 15- to 17-year-olds surveyed responded that one "cannot become infected with HIV by having unprotected oral sex," and an additional 15% didn't know whether or not one could become infected in that manner.

## Oral Sex and the Risk of HIV Transmission

The risk of HIV transmission from an infected partner through oral sex is much less than the risk of HIV transmission from anal or vaginal sex. Measuring the exact risk of HIV transmission as a result of oral sex is very difficult. Additionally, because most sexually active individuals practice oral sex in addition to other forms of sex, such as vaginal and/or anal sex, when transmission occurs, it is difficult to determine whether or not it occurred as a result of oral sex or other more risky sexual activities. Finally, several co-factors may increase the risk of HIV transmission through oral sex, including: oral ulcers, bleeding gums, genital sores, and the presence of other STDs. What is known is that HIV has been transmitted through fellatio, cunnilingus, and anilingus.



1.800.CDC.INFO(232.4636)  
In English, en Español  
24 Hours/Day

cdcinfo@cdc.gov  
www.cdc.gov/hiv

## Other STDs Can Also Be Transmitted From Oral Sex

In addition to HIV, other STDs can be transmitted through oral sex with an infected partner. Examples of these STDs include herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, genital warts (HPV), intestinal parasites (amebiasis), and hepatitis A.

## Oral Sex and Reducing the Risk of HIV Transmission

The consequences of HIV infection are life-long. If treatment is not initiated in a timely manner, HIV can be extremely serious and life threatening. However, there are steps you can take to lower the risk of getting HIV from oral sex.

Generally, the use of a physical barrier during oral sex can reduce the risk of transmission of HIV and other STDs. A latex or plastic condom may be used on the penis to reduce the risk of oral-penile transmission. If your partner is a female, a cut-open condom or a dental dam can be used between your mouth and the vagina. Similarly, regardless of the sex of your partner, if your mouth will come in contact with your partner's anus, a cut-open condom or dental dam can be used between your mouth and the anus.

At least one scientific article has suggested that plastic food wrap may be used as a barrier to protect against herpes simplex virus during oral-vaginal or oral-anal sex. However, there are no data regarding the effectiveness of plastic food wrap in decreasing transmission of HIV and other STDs in this manner and it is not manufactured or approved by the FDA for this purpose.

### HIV/AIDS RESOURCES

#### CDC HIV/AIDS

[www.cdc.gov/hiv](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv)  
CDC HIV/AIDS resources

#### CDC-INFO

1-800-232-4636  
Information about personal risk and where to get an HIV test

#### CDC National HIV Testing Resources

[www.hivtest.org](http://www.hivtest.org)  
Location of HIV testing sites

#### CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)

1-800-458-5231  
[www.cdcpin.org](http://www.cdcpin.org)  
CDC resources, technical assistance, and publications

#### AIDSinfo

1-800-448-0440  
[www.aidsinfo.nih.gov](http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov)  
Resources on HIV/AIDS treatment and clinical trials