

Oral sex and oral health: An enigma in itself

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Abstract

Oral sex is commonly practiced by sexually active couples of various age groups, including male-female and same-gender adolescents. The various type of oral sex practices are fellatio, cunnilingus, and anilingus. Oral sex can transmit oral, respiratory, and genital infections from one site in body to the other. Oral health has a direct correlation on the transmission of infection; a cut in the mouth, bleeding gums, lip sores or broken skin increases chances of life-threatening infections. Although oral sex is considered a low risk activity, it is important to use protection such as physical barriers, health and medical issues, ethical issues, and oral hygiene and dental issues. The ulcerations or unhealthy periodontium in mouth accelerates the phenomenon of transmission of infections into the circulation. Thus, consequences of unhealthy or painful oral cavity are significant and oral health should be given paramount importance for the practice of oral sex.

Key words: Oral health, oral physician, oral sex

INTRODUCTION

A significant proportion of adolescents are engaging in noncoital sexual activities which includes oral sex commonly. Oral sex refers to sexual activities involving the stimulation of the genitalia by the use of the mouth, tongue, teeth or throat.^[1] It is now very common in both heterosexual and homosexual couples among people of all sexual orientations. They may practice it as part of foreplay before, during or following sexual intercourse. Studies indicate that adolescents have had oral sex before their first experience with sexual intercourse^[2-6] that more adolescents have had oral sex than vaginal sex^[3-7] and that few adolescents who engage in oral sex use barrier protection.^[8]

The various types of oral sex performed are:^[1]

- Cunnilingus (Oral Vaginal Contact): Oral

stimulation of a woman's vagina and/or vulva, especially her clitoris, by her partner's lips and tongue

- Fellatio (Oral Penile Contact): Stimulation of a man's penis by his partner's mouth-usually by licking or sucking
- Anilingus (Oral Anal Contact): Stimulation of the partner's anus with tongue or lips.

While the youth consider oral sex much "safer" than vaginal sex, this is a perilous fallacy. Although pregnancy is not an outcome of oral sex but may lead to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Adults involved in oral sex need to know that it is associated with several STIs including syphilis,^[9] gonorrhoea,^[10,11] herpes,^[12] HIV,^[13] chlamydia,^[14] and HPV^[11] can also be transmitted through oral sex.

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Table 1: Different infections and presenting features

| Infection | Method | Presenting features |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Human immunodeficiency virus ^[13] | Cunnilingus, fellatio, and anilingus | Life-threatening sexual transmitting disease Hamper immune system especially CD4 cells secondary and superinfection proceeds No specific cure though HAART has some significant effects |
| Gonorrhea ^[10] | Fellatio | Sexual transmitted disease Sore throat Burning sensation and discharge from penis In extreme cases cause infertility and tubal pungency in women Increases HIV load Treatment with antibiotics under proper medical visualization |
| Syphilis ^[9] | Anilingus, cunnilingus, and fellatio | Sexual transmitted disease Easily passed through contact with open sores (commonly called chancres) on the penis, anus or mouth (white spots in mouth) Sores, warts, and rashes of syphilis infection are painless Left untreated syphilis can eventually cause brain damage, heart disease, blindness, and death Open syphilis sores or chancres provide an easy entry and exit for HIV and can increase viral load Antibiotic coverage and periodic medical check-ups will be the line of treatment |
| Chlamydia ^[14] | Fellatio, cunnilingus, and anilingus | STD caused by the <i>Chlamydia trachomatis</i> bacteria and affects women more than men Common features include pain while urinating, smelly vaginal or penile discharge, spotting after intercourse, can be found in the throat but less commonly than gonorrhea In extreme cases cause severe damage to women reproductive system, including permanent infertility Increases HIV viral load can be cured by proper medical treatment |
| Herpes ^[12] | Fellatio, cunnilingus, and anilingus | An STD caused by herpes simplex virus is the most common cause of genital ulceration. There are two types of the virus: Type 1 affects mainly the lip causing cold sores and type 2 causes blisters on the genitals Sores and blisters (usually on the lips, genitals or anus) are very infectious and painful Research suggests that having genital herpes can more than double your risk for HIV infection Some individuals with herpes usually have periodic outbreaks throughout their lives Treatment can reduce the frequency and severity of herpes outbreaks, but there is no cure |
| Human papilloma virus-genital warts ^[11] | All modes of oral sex | HPV infection and genital warts are the most common STDs Warts usually appear on the penis or in the anus but may also occur in or around the mouth or lips. Genital warts may be more common and harder to treat Spread through skin-to-skin contact, contact with warts or HPV While most strains of HPV only cause warts, some strains may cause oral or throat cancers Different cures are available, but the virus stays in the body |
| NSU ^[1] | Fellatio, cunnilingus | NSU can cause burning when urinating and/or discharge from the penis Infections of the throat can cause a sore throat NSU may amplify viral load in semen making it easier to spread HIV Manageable with antibiotics and hospitalization |
| Hepatitis A and E ^[18] | Anilingus | Both these diseases can be spread through oral sex. Hepatitis A and E both are contagious viral infections of the liver Common symptoms of hepatitis are fever, diarrhea Loss of appetite, dark urine, vomiting, jaundice, and pain in the abdomen Vaccination is available for prevention |
| Hepatitis B ^[18] | Fellatio, cunnilingus, and anilingus | It is most commonly transmitted by inoculation of infected blood, virus particles are found in semen, stool, and saliva, as well as blood. There is clear evidence that it can be transmitted through vaginal and anal intercourse, but it is unproven whether it can be transmitted through oral sex Hepatitis B can cause weakness, dark urine, jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes), and enlarged liver Vaccination is available for prevention |
| Bowel organisms and worms ^[1] | Anilingus | The bowel organisms <i>Salmonella</i> , <i>Shigella</i> , and <i>Campylobacter</i> can all be transmitted Abdominal pain and diarrhea Treated well after microbiological stool examination |
| Intestinal parasites ^[1] | Anilingus | These include <i>Amoeba</i> , <i>Giardia</i> , and <i>Cryptosporidia</i> symptoms include unknown diarrhea, stomach cramps, bloating, increased gas, and nausea Treated well after microbiological stool examination |

HIV=Human immunodeficiency virus; STDs=Sexually transmitted diseases; HPV=Human papillomavirus; NSU=Nonspecific urethritis; HAART=Highly active antiretroviral therapy

ORAL CAVITY IN HEALTH

Good oral hygiene is the fundamental for good quality of life. Mouth acts as a window to lot of systemic

diseases and serves as a port of entry of the various infections that can alter and affect the immune status of the person. The oral cavity has the potential to

harbor about 600 different bacterial species of which more than 150 species may be present as commensal. Tooth surface can have as many as billion bacteria in its attached bacterial plaque and oral care may not only reduce the microbial load of the mouth, but the risk for pain and oral infections as well. Lesions of the oral cavity have an immense impact on the quality of life of patients with complex advanced diseases;^[15] they cause considerable morbidity and diminish patients physical and psychological well-being. The consequences of unhealthy or painful oral cavity are significant and oral health should be given paramount importance for the practice of oral sex. The good oral health permits in building up a defense against the various viruses and organisms by obstructing their entry into the body and circulation.

ORAL HEALTH AND ORAL SEX

Although very less research is available on the oral sex and oral health status but oral sex can transmit oral, respiratory, and genital pathogens [Table 1].^[16] Oral-genital contact can transmit a number of STIs. Contact of body fluids such as saliva, precum, semen, vaginal secretions, and menstrual blood develop the risk of infection that can be transmitted through orogenital route. The practice of oral sex is highly prevalent among young people, regardless of whether they have previously engaged in penetrative intercourse and more of these body fluids you are exposed to the greater risk of infection there would be^[17] open sores, cuts, abrasions, and periodontal disease are the various channels in oral cavity that serve as a gateway of entry of infection from oral cavity to blood stream. The clinical presentation of the various venereal diseases and infections spread

through oral sex along with the possible channel of passage are mentioned below:

PREVENTION

To avoid risks of infections during oral sex, it is advisable to keep body fluids (semen and vaginal fluids) out of the mouth as earliest [Table 2]. The oral cavity should be free from any potential bleeding disease. Due to disease risks, many medical professionals advise the use of condoms or dental dams when performing or receiving oral sex with a partner whose STD status is unknown. A makeshift dental dam can be made out of a condom. Using a real dental dam is preferable, because real dental dams are larger and the makeshift version may be accidentally poked with the scissors during the cutting procedure. Plastic wrap may also be used as a barrier during oral sex, but many find that the thickness of the plastic dulls sensation. Details of various methods and technique are illustrated as follows:

CONCLUSION

The practice of oral sex is also highly prevalent among young people, regardless of whether they have previously engaged in penetrative intercourse. Oral sex involves giving or receiving oral stimulation (i.e., sucking or licking) to the penis, the vagina, and/or the anus. However, although the risk of STD transmission is far greater during vaginal and anal sex than during oral sex, the increasing practice of oral sex, low rates of barrier method use, and the finding that first oral sex often occurs prior to first vaginal or anal sex will help increase the relative importance of oral sex as a mode of

Table 2: Methods of prevention

| Method | Feature | Disadvantage | Directions |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Plastic wraps | Inexpensive and easy to locate Covers large area Lubricated if required More pressure sensitive | Chances of torn by finger nails Slip up during the sexual course Aggressive sexual act may torn the plastic wrap | Cover the vulva area with the plastic wrap. Either cut a piece of the wrap and hold it in place or wrap the pelvic area Add lubricants for more sensitivity and sexual pleasures After the act discard the wrap safely |
| Dental dams/latex square barriers | Provides a strong latex barrier Lubricated and flavored can be used | Covers a small area and fluids may seep past the dam May not be used with oil-based lubricants because they will break down the latex Less sensation of warmth and feeling Not easily available | Hold the latex square over the vulva area Sensitivity can be increased by lubricant on the side facing the vulva Single use for one act |
| Condoms | Non-lubricated condom, flavor lubricated condom or flavored non-lubricated condom | Provides a small area of protection and care to ensure that fluids don't seep past the condom into the mouth or the anus/ vulva area Use water-based lubricant Prevents effectively if placed properly | Unroll the condom and cut off the very tip and the very end of the condom and cut lengthwise to make a rectangle Hold the latex square over the vulva area Water-based lubricant (not Vaseline or oils) can be used for increasing sensitivity During rimming place the condom over the anus Single time use per sexual act |

transmission for genital pathogens. HIV, other STDs can be transmitted through oral sex with an infected partner examples of these STDs include HIV, herpes, syphilis, gonorrhoea, genital warts (HPV), intestinal parasites, and hepatitis. There are several ways to reduce the risks of oral sex. In general, the use of a physical barrier during oral sex can reduce the risk of transmission of HIV and other STDs. To reduce the risk of infection during unprotected oral sex, limit exposure to sexual fluids and ensure that no cuts or lesions are present in the mouth or on genitals. A good oral health, free from bleeding gums, lip sores, cuts, broken skin, and oral epithelium enormously reduces the chances of transmission of infection among the partners indulge in oral sex. A periodic oral health check-up is mandatory among the people frequently involved in oral sex and thus good oral hygiene is the fundamental for oral integrity as it greatly affects the quality of life.

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