

Oral Sex

Historically it has been very difficult to establish what influence oral sex has in the transmission of HIV with only a few cases recorded. On the other hand, many people have vaginal or anal sex, which are the well known forms of HIV transmission. Even though there have been apparently some cases of HIV transmission through oral sex, health professionals have focused more on the ways of transmission that present more risks. This strategy may have played a role in the low risk profile associated with oral sex and may have left some people confused about the different options for risk reduction.

What risks are involved with oral sex?

HIV can be transmitted from one person to another depending on the type of contact they have had together. For example, HIV transmission will be more likely to happen through unprotected sexual contacts (i.e. without condoms), non sterilized needle exchange between intravenous drug users, and through mother-to-child vertical transmission.

It has been proved that oral sex is the least risky of all types of sexual relations. However it is not completely free of risk. Also it is very important to take into account that other sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, herpes and gonorrhea, can be easily transmitted through oral sex.

A few years ago some studies were published on the risk of HIV transmission through oral sex. One study in North America showed that out of 122 gay men living with HIV, 8% declared that oral sex was their only risky activity. However, some of the participants who had first made that statement, later admitted that they had also had unprotected anal sex.

When is oral sex the most risky?

The greatest risk of HIV transmission through oral sex is when another sexually transmitted disease is present and has not been cured or treated correctly. There is also a risk of transmission through oral sex if there are open sores, lesions or abrasions in the mouth or gums, and if one of the partners has an infection, including sexually transmitted diseases, in the throat or the mouth, which could cause inflammation.

Viral load tests show that HIV particles are almost always found in semen. A high viral load in the blood can indicate a high viral load in the semen. Meanwhile the opposite may not be certain: having an undetectable viral load in the blood does not mean that there is no HIV particles in the semen.

The idea that if an anti-HIV treatment is being taken it will reduce the risk of infection or protect the other sexual partner, is absolutely unfounded.

In the case of vaginal fluid the viral load levels can vary. Evidently these levels are higher during the menstruation period: when the cells that carry HIV get into the cervix, there is a higher possibility that they will be found in the vaginal

fluid along with blood. This situation increases the risk of transmission through oral sex during the menstruation period.

How can risks be reduced?

There are many ways of reducing the risks that are involved with oral sex. Naturally some will be more acceptable than others depending on the person. You will be the only one to decide what level of risk is acceptable for yourself. If you wish, you can talk to your doctor about it or go to an NGO that you feel comfortable with. Many of the following strategies also offer some protection against other sexually transmitted diseases.

○ You may go on having oral sex if you think the risk of HIV transmission is low, or you may decide to stop even though you know the risk is low.

○ You may consider reducing the number of partners with whom you practice oral sex, or go on with it provided that you are using protective barriers such as condoms with men, and a latex ring or a female condom with women.

○ You may decide to only receive oral sex, which seems safer than giving it to another person.

○ You may decide to ejaculate, or not to, in the mouth of your partner, and the other way round.

○ You may decide not to have oral sex with a woman during her menstruation period.

○ The risks of HIV transmission through oral sex increase if you have problems with bleeding gums, ulcers, open wounds or sores in the mouth. Before having oral sex you may also decide not to brush your teeth, nor use dental floss to avoid micro lesions in the gums.

If you think that you have contracted some type of sexually transmitted disease it is highly recommended that you go to your doctor for a check up, which will make it possible to treat it in time if you do have one, and will reduce the risk to transmit that disease, along with HIV, to your sexual partners. This way, you will also reduce the risk of contracting HIV if you are HIV-.