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Is Oral Sex *Really* Sex?

Many U.S. teens unaware that it's not without risks, experts warn

By Nicole Charbonneau
HealthScout Reporter

TUESDAY, Dec. 19 (HealthScout) -- Teens are now at a 60-year low for having babies, but that's not an indication they're hitting the books instead of the sheets.

In fact, a new report suggests that teens may be switching to non-vaginal forms of intercourse, particularly oral sex, because they believe it's safer or not even the same as "having sex." And while the research is still patchy, suggests the report, it raises concerns that teens having oral sex -- while avoiding the risk of pregnancy -- are still vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases.

"The research seems to indicate that the risk of HIV from oral sex is quite low," says Cory Richards senior vice president of public policy at [the Alan Guttmacher Institute](#). "But other STDs ... herpes, gonorrhea, chlamydia, HPV -- they all can be passed through oral sex." HPV is Human papilloma virus and is one of the most common STDs in this country.

The report was done by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a non-profit organization based in New York, and Washington, D.C., and appears in the November/December 2000 issue of *Family Planning Perspectives*.

The report reviewed the existing medical research on adolescent sexual behaviors and included a commentary that came from interviewing two dozen health experts. They agreed that the widespread perception that oral sex is becoming more common is still impossible to confirm. That's because reliable national data on these behaviors simply don't exist, says Richards.

"The question of whether oral sex is or is not increasing among teens is not really the thing to focus on because the answer to that is, in a scientific sense, we really don't know," says Richards. However, they do know that non-vaginal intercourse is happening, and that calls for more research into this area.

"One of the things we need to know more about is the different definitions that people use when they throw around terms like 'sex' and 'abstinence'," he says. "There are a considerable number of people out there who perceive that oral sex is not 'sex'."

To add to the problem, he says, teens aren't the only ones with that impression. Richards says that a considerable proportion of health educators feel the same way, which may influence how they discuss sex with teens. "If you ask them whether they're having sex, if they say yes or no, you want to know what that means," says Richards.

A teen could respond that he or she is not having sex, while still being at risk of STDs via oral sex.

It's not clear why teens might have this perception, but the researchers suspect that sexual education may focus on vaginal intercourse and the risk of pregnancy and STDs involved in that kind of sex and generally ignore oral sex. "Some of our education falls short, particularly in this day and age of 'abstinence-only' education," says Tamara Kreinin, the president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States in New York. "They think they're being good if they have oral sex or engage in other behaviors."

Teens aren't the only ones with a slippery definition of sex. In 1998 President Clinton stated that he "did not have sexual relations with that woman [Monica Lewinsky]" even though he admitted to having oral sex -- something Kreinin says may have factored into teens' views of what oral sex means. Roughly 20 percent of American adults agreed with the president that oral sex isn't really sex. Other studies have shown that some people base their decision on whether orgasm occurred or who was the active partner.

Richards and Kreinin agree that while there is an erroneous notion that discussing sex gives teens ideas about experimenting with it, this report highlights the need for speaking openly with kids about safe sexuality, including oral sex.

"This should be a wake-up call to counselors, health educators and sexuality educators that they need to be aware that they can't just be concerned about vaginal sex," says Richards. "They also need to be aware that when they use terms like 'sex' or 'abstinence', that those terms mean different things to different people, and they need to be specific -- as uncomfortable as that is."

What To Do

If you're the parent of a teen, make sure your child knows that oral sex, like every other form of sex, carries a risk. And then explain what that risk is.

Make an informed decision about sexuality. Check out these Web sites from the [Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States](#), [Advocates for Youth](#), and the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy](#).

You can find out about the drop in the [teen birth rate](#), if you read this HealthScout story that ran in August. And remember, don't count on your [doctor](#) to talk to teens about sex.

SOURCES: Interviews with Cory L. Richards, senior vice president of public policy, Alan Guttmacher Institute, Washington, D.C.; and Tamara Kreinin, M.P.H., president and chief executive officer, Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, New York City.; November/December 2000 *Family Planning Perspectives*

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