

Oral sex and STIs

WHILE oral sex is fast becoming a highlight of many couples' intimate lives, some are unaware that it can expose them to as much sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as with unprotected sexual intercourse.

Oral sex is the act of sexual intimacy from mouth to penis (fellatio), mouth to vagina (cunnilingus) or mouth to anus. Gynaecologist Dr Charles Rockhead, said any sexual infection that one can get from sexual intercourse, can be transmitted through oral sex. "The rule of thumb is that if you won't have unprotected sex with someone, don't have oral sex with them, because the same viral or bacterial infection that can be transmitted through intercourse, can be transmitted through oral sex," he said. Rockhead added that the situation is the same for both men and women. STIs are caused by viruses or bacteria that like warm, soft, moist places such as your mouth and genital area (penis, vulva, vagina, anus, area between penis and anus, and area between vulva and anus). "Remember that most of the viruses are also in the saliva, so you have a transfer from genitals to mouth and from mouth back to the genital area," the doctor noted. While all STIs can be transferred through the mouth, some of the more common ones you can get are chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhoea and herpes. In fact, people can even develop genital warts in the mouth as a result of transfer of STI. HIV can be passed through cuts in the mouth or small abrasions. According to Rockhead, the only way to prevent the transfer of infection is to abstain from both oral and anal sex, as well as intercourse or for both partners to be tested before getting sexually involved. If, however, you choose to have oral sex, ensure that you use a barrier method to prevent direct contact between one partner's mouth and the other's genitals, such as condoms or dental dams. Dental dams are small squares of latex that were made originally for use in dental procedures. They are now commonly used as barriers when performing oral sex on women, to keep in vaginal fluids that could transmit an STI. Some people use plastic wrap instead of a dental dam.