Oral sex

Looking after your sexual health
What is this leaflet about?
This leaflet gives you information about oral sex, the risk of catching and passing on sexually transmitted infections through oral sex, how to get tested and treated if you think you have an infection, and how to protect yourself. Many people believe you cannot get a sexually transmitted infection through oral sex, but it is possible.

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Can oral sex give you cancer in your mouth or throat?

Can I get an infection if my partner gives me oral sex?

Can I get HIV from my partner’s saliva?

What is a dam?

How will I know if I’ve caught a sexually transmitted infection?

Can sexually transmitted infections be treated?

Where can I go for help and advice about sexually transmitted infections?

Will I have to pay for tests and treatments?

How can I find my nearest service?

How fpa can help you?

What is oral sex?

Oral sex involves a person using their mouth, tongue and lips to stimulate a partner’s genitals.

There are different types of oral sex, involving using your mouth and tongue to stimulate:

- a woman’s vagina, vulva and clitoris – known as cunnilingus, going down, giving head
- a man’s penis – known as fellatio, blow job, going down, giving head
- a person’s anus – known as rimming.

Many people give and receive oral sex as an enjoyable part of their sex life. There is no risk of pregnancy from having oral sex but some sexually transmitted infections can be passed on this way.
The external female genitals are collectively known as the vulva. The vulva covers the area from the pubic bone to the perineum (the area between the vagina and anus). The clitoris, urethra and vagina are protected by soft folds of skin known as the inner and outer labia.
How safe is oral sex?

It is very difficult to give a definite answer to this, as it can be hard to find out exactly how a sexually transmitted infection was passed on. What we do know is:

- some infections are spread more easily through oral sex than others
- oral sex is generally safer than unprotected (that is, without a condom) vaginal or anal sex
- for most infections, being given (receiving) oral sex is probably safer than giving oral sex because you are less likely to be exposed to genital fluids
- infections can be passed on through oral sex even if there are no signs or symptoms of the infection
- there are ways of making oral sex safer.

What infections can be passed on through oral sex?

This leaflet covers the main infections that people ask about which can be passed on through oral sex.

The most commonly passed on are:

- herpes simplex
- gonorrhoea
- syphilis.

Infections less frequently passed on include:

- chlamydia
- HIV
- hepatitis A
- hepatitis B
- hepatitis C
- genital warts
- public lice.

The exact risk of getting or passing on each of these infections through oral sex is not known.

It is not known how many people have been infected with HIV through oral sex, but it does happen. The risk is much less than with vaginal or anal sex.

**How are infections passed on through oral sex?**

You can only pass on an infection if you already have one, and you can only get an infection if your partner has an infection. Many people do not get or notice signs or symptoms, and do not know they have an infection.

Infections can be passed on through oral sex in a number of ways:

- **Skin to skin, or hair to hair, contact.**
  Some sexually transmitted infections – herpes simplex (which can cause cold sores on the mouth and genital herpes) and syphilis – cause blisters or sores. If these touch a partner’s mouth, genitals or anus the infection may be passed on. Sometimes the infection can be passed on through skin to skin contact without there being any symptoms.

  It is rare for genital warts to be passed to the mouth and lips through oral sex. Public lice can be passed between pubic hair and any coarse facial hair, such as a beard.
**Body fluids.** The viruses or bacteria that cause some infections can be passed on in infected body fluids (such as semen, pre-ejaculatory fluid (pre-cum), blood, or vaginal secretions). Infection can occur if infected body fluids come into contact with:
- sores, cuts, ulcers, or inflamed cells on the lips, mouth, genitals or anus
- the membrane of the eye
- the cells of the throat.
This contact allows the viruses or bacteria to enter the blood stream or to live in the cells. Chlamydia, gonorrhoea, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV and syphilis can be passed on in this way.

**Ingestion (eating).** Hepatitis A is an infection of the gut that is passed on through infected faeces (shit, poo). It can be passed on through stimulating a partner's anus even if their anal area looks clean.

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**Can I get an infection if I give oral sex to a partner?**

Yes, you could be at risk of an infection if you have licked, kissed or sucked a partner's penis, vulva, vagina or anus. Infections that are more easily passed on this way include gonorrhoea, herpes simplex, hepatitis A, hepatitis B and syphilis, although others can be passed on too.

If your partner has an infection they are more likely to pass it on to you if:
- you have a sore throat or sores, cuts, ulcers or inflamed skin around or on your lips, or in your mouth