

Oral pleasure-oral sexually transmitted infections-oral cancer: A missing link

Sanjeev Laller¹, Pruthvi Raj H V², RajKumar Maurya^{3*}, Mamta Malik⁴, Ravinder S Saini⁵, Sandeep Parashar⁶

^{1,4}Reader, Department of Oral Medicine and Radiology, PDM Dental College and Research Institute, Bahadurgarh, Haryana, INDIA.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Dentistry, BGS Global Institute of Medical Sciences, Bangalore, Karnataka, INDIA.

³Dental Officer, Department of Orthodontics, Corps Dental Unit, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, INDIA.

⁴Lecturer, Department of Oral Medicine and Radiology, PDM Dental College and Research Institute, Bahadurgarh, Haryana, INDIA.

⁵Reader, Department of Dental Technology, COAMS, KCU, Saudi Arabia.

⁶Reader, KD Dental College and Hospital, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA.

Email: bracedbyraj@gmail.com

Abstract

Many men and women find oral sex an intensely pleasurable experience. People use different terms to refer to oral sex (including formal terms like fellatio and cunnilingus and slang terms like blow jobs and giving head). Usually oral sex means one person kissing, licking or sucking another person's genitals. Doctors and researchers can't be sure how many people have been infected with oral sexually transmitted infections (OSTI) and oral cancer through oral sex. This comprehensive review summarizes the potential risks of OSTI and oral cancer through oral sex with their sign and symptoms, mechanism of spread and safety prospects.

Keywords: Oral Pleasure, Oral Sex, OSTI, Oral Cancer.

*Address for Correspondence:

Dr. RajKumar Maurya, Dental Officer, Department of Orthodontics, Corps Dental Unit, Bhopal-462001, Madhya Pradesh, INDIA.

Email: bracedbyraj@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Oral sex means a person using their mouth, tongue and lips to stimulate other partner's Genitals. Literature indicates that oral sex is common among sexually active male-female and same-gender couples of various ages, including adolescents also. Although there are only scant national data describing how often adolescents engage in oral sex; some data suggest that many adolescents who commonly engage in oral sex do not consider it to be "sex;" whereas for them oral sex is an option to experience sex while still, in their minds, remaining

abstinent.^{1, 2} Although oral sex has been shown to be a low risk activity, but it is not risk free. Again, it depends on the viral load of the person with infection and the oral health of the person. It's also necessary to keep in mind that other sexually transmitted infections, such as syphilis, herpes and gonorrhoea, can be quite easily transmitted through oral sex. Regular oral health check up is must for those not using condoms or dental dams during the oral sex activity.³ Till date association of oral cancer and OSTI to sexual practice is a controversial and debatable topic. There are limited epidemiologic and experimental studies regarding it, which can provide conclusive evidence. It has been noticed recently that peak of oral cancer is shifting from older to younger age as several other parameters such as unprotected oral sex and viruses are playing an active role in its etiology.⁴

ORAL PLEASURE/SEX AND ORAL CANCER

Research is currently looking for the link between oral sex and mouth and throat cancer. Mouth and throat cancer has been linked to some types of Human papilloma virus (HPV), which can be passed on through sexual contact,

including oral sex and these are not the same types of HPV that cause genital warts.² Several studies have been performed to evaluate the association between Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and oral cancer risk. Since HPV16 is one of the most predominant strain in anogenital Carcinomas, possible chances of its transmission to the oropharyngeal region can occur through the mouth, especially during oral sex in sexually active individuals. In a study among males, Maden et al found six fold and threefold associations between oral cancer and detection of HPV type 16 DNA and HPV type 6 DNA, respectively, in exfoliated oral tissue. Role of Human Papilloma virus in causing cervical cancer is well established but its role in oral cancer is of recent interest.^{4,5,6,7} According to Café discussion on oral sex by Mario A Brondani (2010), recent emphasis has been placed on the potential links between oral sex, HPV infection, and oral cancer development. HPV is the most frequent and common sexually transmitted infections worldwide. HPV is transmitted by skin and mucosal contact. It is estimated that about 75% of all sexually active men and women are infected with HPV. The majority will remain asymptomatic, but infectious. Oral sex appears to be a potential route for HPV transmission even though it is difficult to prove. HPV 16 and 18 are risk factors for the development of oral cancer, the same strain associated with ano-genital malignancies. Persons who are infected with HPV are 30 times more likely to develop oral cancer than those who are not. Tobacco smokers are 3 times more likely and alcoholics are 2.5 times more likely to develop oral cancer than non-smokers or non-alcoholics, respectively. High risk individuals include those with multiple oral sexual partners during a life-time and who experience oral sex earlier. High frequency of oral sex, about 3–5 times a week in the past 30 days, increases 9 times the risk for developing oral cancer.⁸

Infections transmitted through oral sex

There are many infections which are transmitted through oral sex but the common one are: Herpes simplex, gonorrhoea and syphilis whereas on the other hand infections less frequently transmitted are: chlamydia, HIV, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, genital warts and pubic lice. Though there are some reports dictating candidiasis (vaginal thrush) being more common among people who have more frequent oral sex, but this may be due to some other mechanism than infection from the mouth. There is also evidence that some respiratory tract organisms can be found in the genital tract. The exact risk of getting or passing on each of these infections through oral sex is yet not well known. It is not well documented that, 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.^{2,9} It is concluded from epidemiological and physiological evidence that the mouth is an extremely uncommon place for HIV to be passed on. Although HIV can be found in saliva, it is not common, and saliva itself may have an inhibitory effect on the virus. The transmission is made easier by oral trauma such as ulcers or inflamed gums, but exposure to saliva is much less risky than exposure to blood.⁹ HIV is not passed on through exposure to saliva alone, and thus a person with HIV performing oral sex on someone who is HIV negative is considered to be at very low risk. The type of oral sex also makes a difference to the level of transmission risk. HIV transmission through 'receptive fellatio', which means an HIV-negative person performing oral sex on a man with HIV is possible and it is likely that HIV transmission happens in this way sometimes. HIV transmission through 'insertive fellatio', which means an HIV-negative man receiving oral sex from a person with HIV, is very low risk and may be impossible.³

Spread of OST infections

It is well known that, Herpes simplex manifests with cold sores in the mouth and blisters on the genitals and syphilis can result open sores or a skin rash. If these touch a partners mouth, genitals or anus the infection may be passed on. It is rare for genital warts to be passed to the mouth and lips through oral sex. The viruses or bacteria that cause some infections can be passed on in infected body fluids (such as semen, pre-ejaculatory fluid, blood, or vaginal secretions). Infection can be the result of contact of infected body fluids with sores, cuts, ulcers, or inflamed cells on the lips, mouth, genitals or anus, the membrane of the eye and 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 this way. Hepatitis A is an infection of the gut that is passed on through infected faeces.²

Signs and symptoms of OSTI's

Signs and symptoms are not seen in every individual/person who has a sexual transmitted infection. Sometimes these do not appear for months and sometimes they go away but if it is subclinical stage, it can pass on the infection. If you have had unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex and notice any of the following signs and symptoms then advice of physician is must: itches, rashes, lumps or blisters in or around the genitals, vagina, anus or mouth; unusual discharge from the vagina; discharge from the penis; irritation, pain or burning when you pass urine; pain and/or bleeding during or after sex; bleeding between periods; pain in the testicles or lower abdomen; a sore throat.² Liver is affected most by Hepatitis A, B and C, whereas the genitals are unaffected.

Signs and/or symptoms of hepatitis A, B and C may include: flu-like illness, such as fever, general aches and headaches; tiredness and feeling sick, sometimes with vomiting and diarrhoea; dark coloured urine and/or pale faeces; jaundice.²

SAFETY PROSPECTS AND PREVENTION OF OSTI'S AND ORAL CANCER

Oral sex can be a very exciting and enjoyable activity. However, it is not without its risks. Oral sex can be the cause of oral sexually transmitted infections (OSTI's) and it may also pass on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), although this is thought to be at very low risk. For protective measures always look after your mouth through careful brushing and flossing of teeth. Have regular dental check up. There should be no cuts, sores, ulcers or bleeding gums. However, avoid brushing or flossing shortly before or after oral sex because this may cause bleeding from gums. Mouth washes should be avoided immediately before or after sex because it may reduce protection by removing natural substances normally found in the mouth. As HIV can be present in all sexual fluids of an infected person, so avoid oral sex as it can increase the risk of transmission. The best advice is to use a condom / dental dam for oral sex. Oral sex should be avoided during herpes infected period. It would be wise to avoid it if you have a sore throat or throat infection. Flavoured condoms and dental dams can be more pleasurable than ordinary condoms. Menstruation may increase the chance of HIV being present around the vulva, so take precautions with oral sex at this time. Have regular sexual health screenings. This will help in diagnosis, if you have any sexually transmitted infections, which may increase the likelihood of transmission of HIV.^{3,7,10}

Future Steps

Generally health care providers focus mostly on tobacco and alcohol only, while talking about risk factors for oral cancer but history of oral pleasure/sex should also be considered. Patients might not feel comfortable in discussing oral sex practices with a dentist, then it's dentist's duty to make the patients feel that oral sex practices can be shared and discussed. On an average, less than 5% of dentists ask about oral sexual practices during routine medical and dental history taken, even the percentage among physicians is not much higher. Thus

dental practitioners should not hesitate in taking history of oral sexual acts by patients. Vaccines like Gardasil and Cervarix are used to prevent HPV^{6,11,16,18} infection in girls, before the first sexual experience. Most of women at high risk for HPV infection do not develop cervical cancer. These vaccines have not been tested against oral HPV. And also such vaccines have been advocated to be used in boys, before their first sexual experience.⁸

CONCLUSION

Most sexually transmitted infections are easily treated but treatment should be started as soon as possible. Infections, such as HIV, does not have definitive cure but drugs are available that can reduce the symptoms and help prevent or delay the development of late stage HIV infection. Oral cancer is a multi factorial disease and oral sex should also be considered as one of the cause. Patient as well as dental practitioners should feel that oral sex practices are meant to be discussed in dental office.

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