

## Everything You Should Know About Oral STDs (But Probably Don't)

The safe sex tips no one talks about

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Giphy

For every legit fact about safe sex, there's an urban legend that just won't die (double-bagging, anyone?). Probably one of the most dangerous myths is that oral sex is safer than the p-in-v variety because you can't get an STD from going down on someone. Au contraire:

Many STDs *can* be transmitted through oral, including herpes, HPV, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis.

"Because oral sex is seen as a safer alternative, there's growing concern on finding ways to educate and protect against these infections," says Toronto-based endodontist [Gary Glassman, D.D.S.](#) "It's important to be self-aware of both your own oral health and that of your partner as best you can."

To keep your mouth happy and healthy (and your sex life too), here are six facts you need to know about oral STDs:

## **1. You can have an oral STD and not know it.**

"Often, an oral STD doesn't produce any noticeable symptoms," says Glassman, so just because you and your partner feel fine doesn't mean you're off the hook. "Maintaining a high standard of oral hygiene reduces your risk for developing any type of sore or infection in the mouth that can increase your risk of contracting an STD," says Glassman. And even though fessing up to your dentist about your oral sex habits might seem awkward, they can be your first line of defense in diagnosing an oral STD.

## **2. You can't get an oral STD from sharing food or drinks.**

Different STDs are passed in different ways, but things like sharing food, using the same cutlery, and drinking from the same glass *aren't* any of them, according to the [Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States](#). The sneakiest ways oral STDs can be passed are through kissing (think: herpes) and skin-to-skin contact (HPV). Besides stellar oral hygiene skills, protection is paramount—and doesn't need to come in the form of a hazmat suit. Using condoms or a dental dam during the deed, keeping your pout moisturized to prevent cracked lips, and steering clear of oral when you have a cut in or around your mouth can all decrease your risk of infection, says Glassman.

## **3. You shouldn't brush your teeth before or after oral sex.**

Contrary to popular belief, brushing your teeth or swishing mouthwash doesn't reduce your risk of transmission, and in fact, it can make you more susceptible to an STD. "Before and after oral sex, rinse your mouth out with water only," says Glassman. Brushing and flossing may be too aggressive a cleaning method—doing so can cause irritation and bleeding gums, ultimately upping your risk. "Even small cuts in the mouth can make it easy for an infection to pass from one partner to another," he says.

## **4. Some oral STD symptoms just look like a cold.**

People are most concerned about the potential vaginal infection that can result from chlamydia, but the infection can spread through oral sex as well, says Gil Weiss, M.D.,

assistant professor of clinical medicine at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Worse, the symptoms that surface could potentially be linked to, well, anything. "The symptoms may be very nonspecific, and may include such common features as a sore throat, cough, fever, and enlarged lymph nodes in the neck," says Dr. Weiss, and that's if there are symptoms at all. Fortunately, a throat culture is all it takes to score a diagnosis, and the infection can be cleared up with antibiotics. "Honest communication about your sexual activity is vital so that your doctor can detect things before they become a bigger issue," he adds.

## **5. They can cause nasty things to happen to your mouth.**

Left untreated, an oral STD can morph your mouth into a cesspool of sores. Some strains of HPV, for example, can lead to the development of warts or lesions in the mouth, says Glassman. And while herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1) just causes cold sores, HSV-2 is the virus associated with genital lesions—and if passed orally, these same lesions and oozing blisters can develop inside the mouth. Gonorrhea can also cause some seriously uncomfortable issues, such as a painful burning sensation in the throat, white spots on the tongue, and even white, foul-smelling discharge in the mouth. Syphilis, meanwhile, can cause large, painful sores in the mouth that are contagious and that can spread all over the body. (Shudders.)

## **6. Oral STDs can cause cancer.**

"HPV is the most common STD in the United States, and some high-risk strains are associated with oral cancers," says Glassman. "HPV-positive oral cancers typically develop in the throat at the base of the tongue, and near or on the tonsils, making them difficult to detect." If you find oral cancer early, there's a 90 percent survival rate—the problem is, 66 percent of oral cancers are found in stage 3 or 4, says Kenneth Magid, D.D.S., of Advanced Dentistry of Westchester in New York, who recommends requesting that an oral cancer screening be included as part of your biannual dental checkup.