

Oral sex is a practice that generally entails a very low risk of HIV transmission. There are nonetheless different factors that could increase or diminish this risk.

## ORAL SEX AND HIV



### 01 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE RISK OF TRANSMISSION

When giving a fellatio, if a person's fluids come into contact with the mucosa or with cuts, sores, or open wounds on the other person's skin it theoretically involves a chance of HIV transmission. The actual probability of it happening is, however, extremely low.

Regardless of other factors, when the person with HIV takes antiretroviral treatment and their viral load is undetectable, the risk of transmitting the virus is zero.

In general, the risk of HIV transmission is higher for the person giving oral sex than for the person receiving it. The few documented cases of HIV transmission through oral sex have only been recorded in gay men giving a fellatio. There are no documented cases of HIV transmission in people with penises who have a received a fellatio.

Cunnilingus (oral-vaginal sex) is also considered a low-risk sexual practice. However, if the person with a vulva has HIV and her viral load is detectable, this risk may increase during menstruation, as the virus could be present in high amounts in the blood.

Receiving ejaculation in the mouth could increase the risk of transmission, as semen contains a high concentration of the virus.

HIV can also be present in pre-ejaculate fluid. Concentration, however, is very low and not high enough for transmission to occur. This is because the oral mucosa is more resistant than genital and rectal mucosa and because of the diluting effect of saliva and the short exposure time before the pre-ejaculate fluid is swallowed.

Although oral sex is a low-risk practice, the risk can be reduced further through the use of barrier methods such as condoms or polyurethane or latex sheets placed between the mouth and the vulva or anus. In addition to barrier methods, antiretroviral medication prevents transmission in oral sex and in other sexual practices.

### MAIN POINTS

- Oral sex generally involves a low risk of infection, particularly for the person receiving it.
- An undetectable viral load eliminates the risk of HIV transmission through oral sex and by any other sexual practice.
- Barrier methods are a good tool for protecting against HIV transmission in oral sex.
- If you are a sexually active person, testing for HIV and other STIs in your routine health checks may be a good self-care strategy.

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