

SEXtalk)))

Answers to Your Questions about Sex and Relationships

Have a ??? Email sextalk@u.arizona.edu

factoid

25% of UA students have never had sexual intercourse
(Wellness 2001, n=1220)

Q. My roommate and I have been debating whether or not oral sex is indeed sex in the sense that this act could cause someone to lose their virginity. It is my opinion that it's true but my roommate thinks it's not. Who is right?

A. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, 4th Edition (2000), "coitus" (sexual intercourse) is defined as sexual union between a male and a female involving insertion of the penis into the vagina (the focal point is on reproduction), and "virgin" is defined as a person who has not experienced sexual intercourse. Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1998) has a somewhat broader definition of virgin -- a woman who has had no carnal knowledge of man, and a person of the male sex who has not known sexual indulgence. Problematically, these definitions are restricted primarily to heterosexual intercourse -- virtually ignoring homosexual intercourse. Furthermore, as illustrated in your question, sexual activity may include a variety of activities aside from coitus (e.g., oral sex, anal sex, fondling, masturbation, manual stimulation, etc.).

Traditionally, female virginity was thought to exist until a woman's hymen was broken; but, some women are born without a hymen, and others may have one that is stretched or torn due to non-sexual activity such as vigorous exercise. On the other hand, it is possible for some women to have sexual intercourse and still have their hymen intact, penetration causing it only to stretch, but not tear. While some may consider any activity involving penetration (oral, vaginal, or anal) to mean a loss of virginity, others may limit it solely to genital sexual intercourse.

So, in answer to your question "who is right?" -- you both are. Definitions of sex and virginity vary greatly from person to person and each person's values, belief system and sexual orientation will influence his/her perspective of what constitutes sex. The important thing is to examine your beliefs and make your own decisions about what behaviors you consider to be sex. Finally, don't be afraid to stay true to these beliefs and be assertive about your decisions to not participate in any intimate activities that fall outside of your comfort boundaries.

References: Our Sexuality, 8th ed. Crooks & Baur (2001). On Sex and Human Loving. Masters & Johnson (1986).

Erica Haller is a guest writer for this issue. She is currently a student in the Community Health Education program.

Sex Talk is written by Lee Ann Hamilton, M.A., C.H.E.S. & Melissa McGee, Ph.D., M.P.H., health educators at the University of Arizona Campus Health Service. Send your questions to "Sex Talk" c/o Health Promotion & Preventive Services, 200 W. Old Main or E-mail to sextalk@u.arizona.edu. "Sex Talk" appears every Monday. Paid by Campus Health Services.