

# sextalk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

**factoid** At least one in four Americans will contract an STD at some point in their lives. (ASHA, 2005)

**Q.** I was wondering how much “vaginal fluid” has to be present in order for an STD to be contracted. Recently I was involved with a girl and licked around and on top of her vagina but never actually penetrated her “lips” with my tongue. I didn’t have any open sores in my mouth and hadn’t recently vigorously brushed my teeth. The only risk I could see is that I had chapped lips at the time. Am I at risk for contracting an STD even if I was only licking the area for less than a minute?

**A.** The good news: oral sex is generally safer than unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse. The bad news: Oral sex is not completely safe. Going down on someone can result in an infection for either partner, including chlamydia & gonorrhea, (resulting in a throat infection), herpes, genital warts, Hepatitis A, and in rare circumstances, HIV. Sexual infections prefer warm, moist places, like the mouth, urethra, vulva, vagina, penis, and/or anus.

In your situation, chapped lips didn’t increase your risk much at all. The fact that your mouth and tongue touched her mucous membranes is what put you both at risk. Some diseases do require fluids or secretions in order to infect someone, while others can be transmitted through sores or just from skin-to-skin contact. If you have oral herpes (commonly called cold sores) you can transmit the Herpes Simplex virus to a partner’s genitals whether or not you have visible sores present at the time. Many people who have oral or genital herpes are not even aware that they have the infection (symptoms can be mild but the virus can still be spread).

There are ways to make oral sex safer. Using a thin latex “dam” as a barrier between the mouth and a female partner’s genitals can reduce the risks. Dams can be purchased easily on-line or at adult bookstores and sex shops for under \$1.00 each. Using a small (6”x 6”) piece of plastic wrap can work as a cheaper alternative, too. Oral sex on a man can be made safer by using condoms. Flavored condoms or lubricants can make it more enjoyable and eliminates the big question of whether to swallow or not (which is a personal preference issue altogether).

Have a question? Send it to [sextalk@email.arizona.edu](mailto:sextalk@email.arizona.edu)

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