

Do You Think “Oral Sex” is “Having Sex”? Does the Answer Matter?

In recent years, the topic of oral sex among young people has been frequently discussed in the media. Some media reports have gone as far as to suggest that there is an “epidemic” of oral sex breaking out among teens. In fact, research from both Canada and the United States suggests that less than a third of younger teens (i.e., 17 and under) and about half to two-thirds of older teens (18/19) have participated in oral-genital contact one or more times (Boyce, et al., 2006; Lindberg, Jones, & Santelli, 2008). In other words, among young people, oral-genital contact is about as common as sexual intercourse and the two behaviours typically happen at about the same age (Maticka-Tyndale, 2008).

At the same time, there has also been a lot of discussion as to whether teens and young adults today classify oral-genital contact as “having sex” to the same extent that they would classify intercourse as “having sex”. Is oral-genital contact now viewed as an activity that does not carry the same emotional, psychological, social, and health implications as penile-vaginal or penile-anal intercourse and, thus, not considered to be “having sex”?

In this issue of Check the Research, we will examine contemporary research on how people classify oral-genital contact as a behaviour. We will also ask whether classifying oral-genital contact as not “having sex” has implications for our health and well-being that we should be aware of.

Is it Having Sex?

Several studies have examined whether university students classify oral-genital contact as “having sex.” Randal and Byers (2003) asked 197 Canadian university students to indicate from a list of 18 behaviours which ones they considered to be “having sex”. Here, we will look at how the students classified three different behaviours. As you can see in Table 1, both male and female students were much more likely to classify penile-vaginal and penile-anal intercourse as “having sex” than they were to classify it as “having sex” when a partner performed oral-genital contact.

In a similar study, Hans, Gillen, and Akande (2010) asked 477 students at a university in the United States the question “Would you say you ‘had sex’ with someone if the most intimate behavior you engaged in was”, followed by a list of 11 different behaviours. The vast majority of the students said that having penile-vaginal (98%) and penile-anal (78%) intercourse was “having sex” but only about 20% said that oral-genital contact was “having sex”. Interestingly, when the researchers compared their results to a very similar study conducted in 1991, they discovered that current university students are about twice as likely than students in the early 1990’s to not consider oral-genital contact as “having sex”.

Table 1: Percentage of University Students Classifying Behaviours As “Having Sex”*

	Male	Female	Total
Oral contact with genitals	24%	24%	23.2%
Penile-vaginal intercourse	98%	97%	97.6%
Penile-anal intercourse	84%	83%	83.3%

* These results are for the behaviours “with orgasm”; “no orgasm” had similar percentages. Source: Randall & Byers (2003)



Does It Matter That Many Young People Do Not Consider Oral Sex To Be Having Sex?

At first glance we might say that it really doesn't matter whether we label a particular behaviour as "having sex" or not. On the other hand, if saying that oral-genital contact is not "having sex" means that the activity has fewer, if any, implications for our lives, then we may want to examine the issue a little more closely.

First, it is interesting to note that although most of the students in the Randall and Byers (2003) study did not classify oral-genital contact as "having sex", 99% said that if their relationship partner had oral-genital contact with someone else, they would view their partner as having been "unfaithful." For most people, being monogamous means, among other things, that the partners do not have sex with other people. But with so many people not classifying oral-genital contact as "having sex", it might be a good idea for partners at the beginning of a relationship to clarify with each other that they are on the same page on what it means to be monogamous.

Second, some people might assume that if oral-genital contact is not "having sex" then the behaviour has less emotional significance and is less intimate than "having sex" (e.g. intercourse). Malacad and Hess (2010) examined these issues in a study of 181 18-25 year-old Canadian women. The authors found that about half (49.7%) indicated that "I think oral sex is a less intimate activity than intercourse", 40.7% said that oral sex and intercourse were equally intimate and about 8% believed that oral sex is more intimate than intercourse. In sum, the women in this study were split about evenly as to whether oral-genital contact is a less intimate behaviour than intercourse.

Malacad and Hess (2010) also found that, overall, the women expressed positive emotions (e.g., excited) about their most recent experiences of both intercourse and oral-genital contact (especially if they were on the receiving end). As might be expected, the women reported more positive emotions about having intercourse if they were "in love" with their partner. However this was also the case for oral-genital contact: those who said they were "in love" with their partner were more likely to express positive emotions about the activity. Similarly, women who were not "in love" with their partner were more likely to express negative emotions (e.g., disappointment, guilt) for both oral-genital contact and intercourse. These findings indicate that, for these women, some considered oral-genital contact less intimate than intercourse, and some didn't, but, overall, the emotional implications of the two activities were similar.

Third, we might assume that if oral-genital contact is not "having sex" then there is no risk of transmitting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) through oral-genital contact. There is, in fact, some risk. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), the risk of transmitting HIV through oral-genital contact is "much less" than for penis-vagina or penis-anus intercourse but there have been cases where it has occurred through oral-genital contact and there is some risk of transmission for other STI (herpes, syphilis, gonorrhoea, HPV, hepatitis A, intestinal parasites) through oral-genital contact.

What's The Take Home Message?

Oral-genital contact is about as common as penile-vaginal intercourse among young people. Increasingly, young people do not consider oral-genital contact has "having sex". However, we need to be aware that even if we do not classify oral-genital contact as "having sex" this does not mean that we should ignore the potential emotional, relationship, and health implications of the behaviour.



References

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