

Sexual Risks: Myth or Fact?

1. **Anal intercourse is a risk-free way for women to avoid pregnancy and STDs.**

Myth. This is a particularly dangerous myth, since engaging in anal intercourse is one of the easiest ways to spread HIV infection and some other STDs. Because the anus is not as elastic as the vagina and is not lubricated, it can tear more easily, allowing viruses and bacteria to be transmitted directly to the blood of a partner. It is possible for a female to become pregnant from anal sex if semen from the male's ejaculation seeps out and gets into the opening of her vagina. If two people are going to have anal intercourse, they must use a lubricated latex condom to reduce the risks of disease.

2. **A girl can become pregnant if she has unprotected intercourse before she has her first menstrual period.**

Fact. Before a girl's first period, her ovaries release the first ovum, or egg, during ovulation. She can become pregnant if she has unprotected intercourse around the time of her first ovulation, before she ever has her first menstrual period. She also risks getting an STD, whether she has menstruated or not.

3. **Abstinence is the only method of contraception that is 100 percent risk-free.**

Fact. Avoiding sexual intercourse of any kind (oral anal and vaginal), is the only way to absolutely avoid pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, including HIV infection. Practicing abstinence does not require giving up all sexual contact, but, it does mean expressing sexual feelings in ways other than having intercourse of any kind.

4. **Having sexual intercourse with a woman who has no symptoms of STD means there is no risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease or HIV infection.**

Myth. Absolutely not! Having unprotected sex with a female who has no symptoms of STD/ HIV still puts her partner at risk for STD/HIV. While some STDs, such as herpes, have visible symptoms in both males and females, others, such as gonorrhea and chlamydia, typically show no symptoms in females and may also show no symptoms in males. HIV infection may occur in both genders with no symptoms of the disease for 10 years or longer.

5. **A woman does not risk pregnancy if she has unprotected sexual intercourse while she is menstruating.**

Myth. It seems like a female could not get pregnant during her period because her last ovulation was about 14 days before menstrual flow and she shouldn't ovulate again until 10 to 14 days after her period. But pregnancy is possible at any time, even when a girl or woman is menstruating. Females, especially teens, sometimes ovulate unexpectedly, and may even ovulate during their periods. Stress, illness and other factors can bring on ovulation outside of the normal cycle. To avoid pregnancy and STD/HIV, girls and women must use protection when having intercourse at any time, including during a menstrual period.

6. Oral contraceptives (the pill) increase the risk of cancer in women.

Myth. There are side effects for some users of the pill, such as nausea, breast tenderness, headaches and slight weight gain. These are minimal today compared to the side effects of earlier oral contraceptives in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily due to the lower dosage of estrogen in today's pill. There are also health risks for women on the pill who smoke, are over 35, are overweight or have high blood pressure or diabetes. There is no evidence, however, that the pill increases the risk of cancer. In fact, it may reduce the risk of some forms of cancer.

7. Once a person has had gonorrhea and been cured, she or he is not at risk of contracting it again.

Myth. A person can get gonorrhea and other STDs repeatedly. It is very important for anyone who is treated for gonorrhea (or any other sexually transmitted disease) to make sure that her or his sexual partners are treated as well.

8. Latex condoms substantially reduce the risk of pregnancy and STDs, including HIV infection.

Fact. Latex condoms are not 100 percent effective, but after abstinence, they are the most effective way of preventing STDs including HIV infection. In addition, if used correctly, latex condoms will prevent pregnancy about 80 percent of the time.

9. A woman who is nursing a baby still runs the risk of pregnant if she has sex without using protection.

Fact. A few women who breast feed and give their baby no other formula or food may not ovulate and, therefore, will not become pregnant again until after nursing. That is not true for all or even most nursing women. Breast-feeding cannot be relied on for pregnancy prevention, and it does nothing to protect a woman from STD/HIV.

10. A woman can always calculate the “safe” time of her menstrual cycle, when she can have vaginal intercourse and not be at risk for pregnancy.

Myth. There is no time during a woman's cycle when she is absolutely safe from pregnancy. Even if she is monitoring her cycle for signs of ovulation, she cannot be certain she will not get pregnant if she has unprotected intercourse. This is especially true for teen women who cannot count on a regular menstrual cycle.

11. The risks associated with contracting herpes are serious.

Fact. Herpes is a virus that can cause painful sores on the mouth, genitals or anus. Once contracted, it cannot be cured. Women with herpes may have a greater risk of developing cancer of the cervix and should have a Pap smear (medical test done during a pelvic exam) every year. Herpes can also cause brain damage or death in infants who are infected with the virus during the birth process. Women who have herpes must not deliver a child vaginally if, at the time of delivery, they have any active herpes lesions or sores on the genitals or in the birth canal.

12. Once a man is aroused and has an erection, he must ejaculate either through intercourse or masturbation to avoid the risk of harmful physical effects.

Myth. No harm occurs if a man does not ejaculate after he gets an erection. Semen does not back up in his testicles and cause infection or disease. A man might feel some discomfort and heaviness in his testicles if he is sexually excited for a long period of time without ejaculating. Some people call this condition “blue balled.” Any discomfort will disappear eventually.

13. A woman is not at risk of pregnancy unless a man ejaculates inside her vagina.

Myth. If a man ejaculates near the opening to a woman's vagina or touches her vulva while he has semen on his fingers, it is possible for sperm to find their way inside and fertilize an ovum. Women have become pregnant without ever actually having intercourse. Some STDs and HIV infection can be transmitted if there is an exchange of body fluids, with or without penetration.

14. There is still a significant risk of HIV transmission with condoms, since the pores in the latex are large enough for the virus to pass through.

Myth. Some groups have reported inaccurate research findings that suggest HIV can pass through latex condoms, but that is not true. The reports were meant to scare teens and adults into thinking condoms would not help prevent the spread of HIV infection. In fact, standard tests show that water molecules, which are five times smaller than HIV, cannot pass through a latex condom. However, lambskin

condoms have much larger pores that can allow HIV and other STDs to pass through, so they should not be used for protection.

15. A person infected with an STD has a greater risk of HIV infection.

Fact. HIV can enter the bloodstream when blood or other body fluids come in contact with any open sore. The lesions caused by STDs such as herpes or syphilis provide a possible entry point for the virus and put a person at much greater risk of HIV infection.

16. The only drugs that increase the risk of HIV infection are those that are injected with a needle and syringe.

Myth. Sharing needles or works with other people increases a person's chances of getting infected with HIV. In addition, however, use of any drugs, including alcohol, increases the likelihood that a person will be uninhibited enough to take sexual risks, like having intercourse without a condom, or having sex with several partners. Unprotected intercourse always puts a person at risk of HIV infection.

17. The risk of HIV is greater if a woman has sex while she is menstruating.

Fact. The blood of a woman infected with HIV carries the virus. During menstruation, her sexual partner must not have any contact with the menstrual blood and will be safest by avoiding contact with the vagina during a woman's menstrual period.