Dear Alice,

One question I keep looking for good advice on: what's the best way to clean a leather cat o'nine tails between uses, especially if it drew blood? I'm worried about HIV and Hepatitis, although there are probably other health risks involved, too. Anyway, thanks!

? Swishing

Answer

Dear Swishing,

Sharing of sex toys and infectious disease transmission hasn't been studied extensively (as you might have guessed). However, all infectious diseases do require: 1) presence of the disease, and 2) proper transmission. Clearly knowing the HIV, hepatitis (B and C, particularly), and other blood borne disease statuses of all the people involved will indicate if the disease is present. For example, if two people are thoroughly tested and are both negative of HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C, then there is no HIV or hepatitis B and C present to transmit. If say, other people of unknown statuses are included into the mix, the presence of disease becomes unclear and things may get more risky.

The second requirement for disease infection requires proper transmission, which brings us to your question. Properly cleaning your cat o'nine tails or other sex toys may aid in reducing or eliminating the risk of transmission of many infectious diseases. Below is a list of "better safe than sorry" cleaning methods for sexual playthings. Cleaning methods depend on the material that the cat o'nine tails is made from. And remember that although you may not see blood during or after a scene, the skin may release a colorless liquid, called lymph, that contains white blood cells capable of transmitting infectious diseases.

All cats:

- Spray or soak the tips in hydrogen peroxide. Then wipe away the excess with clean towels and let dry for at least a few hours (overnight, if possible).
- When a scene draws blood or there's been a heavy flogging, wash any part of the cat that was exposed to body fluids with water and a strong foaming cleanser first. A hard bristle brush is recommended to clean out any nooks and indentations. Afterwards, wet or immerse the cat in hydrogen peroxide and air dry.
- Some advise that if you're not sure that you've cleaned the toy thoroughly, lay it away for
six to eight weeks to make sure potential residual HIV and hepatitis B and C viruses are no longer infectious.

- For absolute safety, you may 'dedicate' the toy, which means that you will use each cat only on one person.

Leather cats:

- After cleaning with hydrogen peroxide and drying, as above, recondition the leather with Lexol or saddle dressing.

Plastic/Rubber cats:

- Clean and disinfect with a ten percent bleach solution (one part bleach to nine parts water).

For more information on how to make S/M safe, check out S/M role-playing [4] in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health [5] archive. It's great that you wish to play it safe and free of infection with your sex toys. Also, consider getting tested for HIV and hepatitis for you or your partner(s) to know your statuses. You can talk to a health care provider about options for testing.

Proper cleaning techniques like those listed above may help prevent the spread of disease. Remember to touch base with consenting partner(s) with the practice and to share your cleaning tips as you schedule your next play date!

Alice!

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