Dear Alice,

My professor was giving a lecture today about oral stimulation and she brought up anilingus. She said that the risk for contracting unwanted bacteria is high. I know that dental dams can be used, but how effective is a good washing before anilingus to rid you or your partner of bacteria?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As your professor said, anilingus (also known as "rimming" or anal oral sex) — kissing, sucking, licking, tonguing the anal opening with the lips and/or tongue — presents a risk for getting or spreading potentially harmful bacteria. Typically, if someone gets these germs, s/he may experience symptoms, including fever, cramping, and diarrhea, rather than easily diagnosed signs of infection. Viruses, including intestinal parasites and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as herpes, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV), and hepatitis, which can infect the anus, also present a risk. It's also possible to be exposed to blood if there are cuts or tears in the anus, or any traces of bloody feces. While a good washing can help "freshen" the anal opening before anilingus, it will not necessarily "rid" the area of germs. Therefore, as you mentioned, when rimming, a latex barrier, with a dab of lube on the side covering the anus, can protect both partners. Some safer sex options include:

- a dam
- non-microwaveable plastic wrap
- a dry condom minus the tip and the elastic ring, and cut along the length
- a powder-free latex glove, with the fingers trimmed off, but not the thumb, and cut along the side opposite the thumb, near where the pinky finger used to be (the space for the thumb can be used by the tongue for penetration and more protection)

While the recipient is at some risk (for example, if the partner has a cold sore, or if there are cuts around the anal opening or in the anus through which bacteria and viruses can enter, if the partner's saliva contains infected blood), the partner with the active tongue is more at risk if his or her partner is infected.

Since the rectum and anal canal are passageways for feces, people who have regular bowel movements generally have trace amounts of feces in the canal. Before rimming, some people wash the anus with a moist, soft cloth to be sure that the area is as clean as possible. It is
important to use gentle products that will not irritate the anus and cause cuts and possible infection. Some people use a mild enema, which flushes and releases water into and then out of the anus to initiate a bowel movement or clean out any traces of feces and bacteria from the anal cavity. Giving an enema 2 to 3 hours before analingus allows the body some time to reabsorb the water before the activity takes place. For some, the enema is pleasurable and erotic; others find it uncomfortable. However, enemas need to be infrequent because they can disrupt the rectum, bowels, and gastrointestinal tract, and the body's own elimination rhythm.

Some people suggest that the "rimmer" use mouthwash afterwards as a way to potentially kill and prevent the spreading of unhealthy bacteria. While research seems to be unavailable to prove this method effective, at least it will freshen the breath.

For additional info about anal health and sex play, look for the books Anal Pleasure And Health by Jack Morin, Ph.D. and The Ultimate Guide To Anal Sex For Women by Tristan Taormino.

Alice!
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Published date:
Mar 08, 2002
Last reviewed on:
Jun 27, 2008
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