Dear Alice,

My roommate has vaginal herpes and we use the same soap. Can I contract the disease from using the same soap?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Scrub a dub dub... the answer to your question is no! According to the National Herpes Hotline [2], herpes is not transmitted through inanimate objects, such as soap, towels, clothing, bed sheets, toilet seats, and spa surfaces. In the case of sharing soap, the herpes virus would be washed away by the soap before it would have the chance to infect someone else. One theoretically possible, but highly unlikely, scenario is contracting the herpes virus from a damp towel. This could happen if an infected person rubs off a good amount of the virus onto a damp towel that is immediately used by an uninfected person, who then wipes it against his or her mucous membranes.

More often, the herpes virus is transmitted from an infected to an uninfected person by direct skin-to-skin contact during kissing, from rubbing skin or naked body parts, sexual intercourse, oral sex, and anal sex. It's also possible to get herpes from touching if fingers that rubbed against an active sore quickly come into direct contact with uninfected mucous membrane tissue.

In rare occurrences, the herpes virus can be transferred from one area of the body to another in the same person (such as from the mouth to the genitals and vice-versa). In order for autoinoculation (self-infection) to occur, large amounts of the virus need to be present on the skin's surface, and this mostly happens during a primary outbreak, after which antibodies reduce the concentration of the virus in an infected person. Autoinoculation is theoretically possible whenever an outbreak or viral shedding occurs, but is highly unlikely at any other stage of infection.

Although herpes cannot be transmitted through soap, some people prefer to use their own bar anyway. Perhaps you can get your own stash of soap, or even switch to shower gel. For more information about herpes and its transmission, check out the many Q&As in the Herpes section [3] of the Sexual & Reproductive Health [4] archive.

Alice!

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Sexual & Reproductive Health
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's) [6]
Herpes [7]

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Shedding light on viral shedding [10]
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