Dear Alice,

What are the pros and cons (legally and morally) of dating your first cousin? To make a long story short, my cousin and I became close friends, then fell in love with each other. We have that "don't care" attitude on what others say or think about our relationship, but are curious anyway.

Signed,
Jus' need advice from a 3rd party...

Answer

Dear Jus' need advice from a 3rd party,...,

Negative reactions to cousins who pair off stem largely from the belief that children from such relationships may have physical and/or mental abnormalities. Newborns with genetic disorders such as spina bifida or cystic fibrosis are more likely to be born of blood relatives because previously unexpressed recessive genes are more likely to appear. First cousins are two-times more likely to bear offspring with a birth defect than children born of couples who don't share a common grandparent. If cousin couples happen to be carrying known genetic diseases, the risks faced by their offspring can jump. Experts say 1 out of 4 such children will have some sort of disorder.

Legally, you can date and be intimate with your first cousin, but if you are considering marriage, laws vary by state and country. In the U.S., some states legally forbid first cousins from marrying, some require genetic counseling before legal union can take place, and other states require proof that at least one potential spouse is infertile. You can find out more about family law in your own state by contacting a legal services office, a law school that offers legal services to students and the public, or searching your state's homepage on the internet. You can also look it up under "marriage" or "domestic relationships" in the legal statutes for your state (paper copies are found in a state government office).

Regarding your question of the moral consequences of dating your first cousin, it's up to the two of you to know what your values are, what you're thinking about for the future, and what's best for you as individuals, a couple, and a family. As with all moral decisions, this is a personal, but complicated matter, given societal norms and the many who see cousin marriages as taboo. If you are considering having children together, it makes sense to seek genetic counseling. A genetic counselor is a nurse or doctor with special training or expertise.
who will perform tests and learn about you and your partner's family history. With a clearer picture of the risks your offspring might face, a counselor can help you reach a decision that makes sense for you, your partner, and if you choose to go down that path, your children as well. You can learn more about genetic counseling by visiting the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation [2]. For more general information and studies on the effects of blood related unions, visit the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation [3] web site.

You say you have a "don't care" attitude, but you are smart to ask about the risks ? legal, moral, and medical. Additionally, while you may not care what society thinks, do you care what other members of your family think? You may want to consider discussion how your relationships affects them. All that said, it sounds as though you and your partner have found something special in each other. No one knows where your dating relationship will lead ? but it's good to be aware as you explore your closeness and make choices.

Alice!

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