

## **Editorial: Adolescents and the Dangers of Oral Sex**

By Joe S. McIlhaney, Jr., M.D.

Some people say it isn't sex. Well then how come it's causing the rampant spread of genital herpes among America's young people?

Oral sex is very popular among teens as young as thirteen. Young girls and boys participating in this kind of activity is said to be a common sight at parties of middle schoolers. The saddest part is that they don't believe they are having sex. Many really think they are protected from the emotional and physical consequences of early sexual activity because, after all, "it's just oral sex."

But a study out of the University of Wisconsin has shown the impact of the oral sex rage. There are two basic types of herpes – one kind transmitted orally and the second transmitted through genital contact. In other words, orally transmitted herpes generally stays transmitted mouth to mouth and genitally transmitted herpes generally stays transmitted genital to genital. Studies conducted over the past 20 years have shown that only about 25 percent of the orally transmitted herpes shows up in the genitals. Now, at least according to the research out of the University Wisconsin, the ratios have reversed. Of students at that university who were newly infected with genital herpes in 2001, 78 percent had the type usually associated with oral transmission, but in the genital area.

Simply put, these data show that young people are suffering the consequences of their false sense of security of this form of "not" sex. Oral sex has become a predominant mode of transmission and spread of the most troubling form of herpes – genital herpes. While less than 10 percent of individuals who have genital herpes even know they have the virus, fully 85 percent of these individuals can still spread the virus. In addition to causing painful symptoms in some infected individuals, herpes can also increase the risk of contracting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

It's time we started warning our kids about oral sex. No parent can stomach picturing his or her sweet, 15-year-old daughter giving oral sex to some high school boy. But it's happening, and these oral sex parties include the "good kids". There's lots of peer pressure to do it because, after all, it's supposedly not sex and it's supposedly just a safe, pleasurable activity. And if you do it, girls get convinced, that boy will really like you. Parents who can't imagine their son or daughter involved, just might be shocked.

And we need to warn them about more than just herpes and other diseases – which are scary enough. The emotional consequences of oral sex can be just as traumatizing to a teenager as intercourse -- especially to girls. There are the same feelings of being used, of low self-esteem, of degradation.

Oral sex – it's sex, for sure. The disease rates are proving it. And the teenagers feeling emotionally used, they are proving it as well.

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