

A Debunking on Teenagers and 'Technical Virginity'

Researchers Find That Oral Sex Isn't Commonplace Among Young People Who Avoid Intercourse

By ROB STEIN
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Contrary to widespread belief, teenagers do not appear to commonly engage in oral sex as a way to preserve their virginity, according to the first study to examine the question nationally.

The analysis of a federal survey of more than 2,200 males and females aged 15 to 19, released yesterday, found that more than half reported having had oral sex. But those who described themselves as virgins were far less likely to say they had tried it than those who had had intercourse.

"There's a popular perception that teens are engaging in serial oral sex as a strategy to avoid vaginal intercourse," said Rachel Jones of the Guttmacher Institute, a private, nonprofit research organization based in New York, who helped do the study. "Our research suggests that's a misperception."

Instead, the study found that teens tend to become sexually active in many ways at about the same time. For example, although only one in four teenage virgins had engaged in oral sex, within six months after their first intercourse more than four out of five adolescents reported having oral sex.

"That suggests that oral and vaginal sex are closely linked," said Jones, whose findings will be published in the July issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. "Most teens don't have oral sex until they have had vaginal sex."

Proponents of sex-education programs that focus on abstinence said the findings debunked the criticism that the approach was inadvertently prompting more teens to have oral sex, which still carries the risk of sexually transmitted disease, in order to preserve their virginity.

"This study . . . invalidates the suggestion that 'technical virgins' account for the rise in oral and anal sex," said Valerie Huber, executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association. "Sexually experienced teens were almost four times more likely to engage in oral sex and 20 times more likely to engage in anal sex than their peers who were virgins."

If anything, the findings support the need to encourage more teens to delay sexual activity of all kinds, she said.

"This report reveals that teen sex — even with a condom — presents significant risk for future sexual experimentation and so underscores the need for redoubled emphasis on abstinence education for teens," she said. "Only abstinence education adequately addresses this problem."

But critics of abstinence programs said the findings reinforced

the need for comprehensive sex education, because teens engage in a wide variety of sexual activities, all of which can spread sexually transmitted diseases.

"More than half of our teens are having sex — vaginal and oral," said James Wagoner, president of the group Advocates for Youth. "We can't afford the luxury of denial. Abstinence-only programs are the embodiment of denial. They have been proven not to work, and it's time to invest in real sex education, including condoms."

Others praised the research for providing much-needed data in the often highly polarized debate over teenage sexuality.

"We have these images of oral sex parties, but it's not based on evidence. It's not based on research," said Claire Brindis, a professor of pediatrics and health policy at the University of California at San Francisco. "A study like this allows us to begin to dissect what actually is going on. It really helps to break both the positive and negative stereotypes."

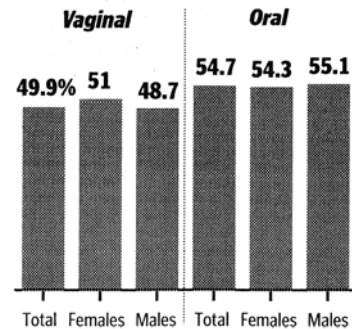
Previous research had suggested that oral sex was increasing among teenagers as an alternative to intercourse, but those studies were based on small samples or anecdotal reports. The new study analyzed data collected from a nationally representative sample of 1,150 females and 1,121 males aged 15 to 19 who were questioned in detail in 2002 for the federal government's National Survey of Family Growth.

Teen Sexual Behavior

A new study analyzed data collected by a large federal survey examining types of sexual activity among teens ages 15-19:

Types of sex

By percentage of those saying they had engaged in the behavior



SOURCE: *Journal of Adolescent Health*

BY TOBEY — THE WASHINGTON POST

A majority of the teens — 55 percent — said they had engaged in oral sex, which was slightly more than the 50 percent who said they had had vaginal sex. But oral sex was much more common among those who already had had intercourse: Eighty-seven percent of those who reported on a computerized questionnaire that they had had vaginal sex said they had engaged in oral sex as well, compared with 23 percent of those

who described themselves as virgins.

When the researchers examined the timing of sexual behaviors, they found that among those who said during face-to-face interviews that had had vaginal sex in the past six months, 82 percent said they also had had oral sex, compared with 26 percent of the virgins.

Among those who had initiated vaginal sex more than three years earlier, 92 percent had engaged in oral sex.

Jones noted that the analysis could not determine which sexual activity tended to occur first.

When the researchers examined the number of partners the teens reported, they found that among those who reported engaging in oral sex, 67 percent had only one partner, "another piece of evidence that there's not a lot of teens engaging in serial oral sex," Jones said.

In addition to the implications for sex-ed classes, the findings indicate that parents should talk with their children more about a variety of sexual activities, experts said.

"When parents talk with children and teenagers about sex, they may need to broaden the number of topics they discuss," said Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a private nonprofit advocacy group. "They have to embrace the 'ick' factor. They have to face the facts."