

What, Me Worry

There's a lot of territory between abstinence and deadly sex. Here's a road map to the risks

Everybody takes risks. Whether we're hang gliding or crossing the street, there is a mechanism in our minds that observes and analyzes, then tells us either "Go for it" or "I'm outta here." When it comes to sex, that risk gauge often functions in the dark, forsaken in favor of the libidinal gauge, which knows only how to say "Yes!", "More!" and "Arrrghhh!" We all know the rewards of nooky; it's the relative dangers that take some heavy thinking.

To anyone who has ever tried to reconcile his sexual activities with a safe-sex manual, it comes as no surprise that the nation's top advisers on STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) like to paint the erotic landscape with a very wide brush.

"We try to avoid a proportional risk assignment," says David Herrell, director of the federally funded Centers for Disease Control National AIDS Hotline, "because human nature is such that a person might think, It's only a 25 percent risk [of getting HIV from cunnilingus], so I can afford to take it. We say people should use a condom or a dental dam for oral sex."

In fact, the 25 percent figure Herrell cites is many thousands of times too high for cunnilingus. Still, to Herrell and other experts from the AIDS Hotline, the very idea of distinguishing between levels of HIV-transmission risk for anal sex, vaginal sex and oral sex is not only outrageous and irresponsible but also bad science. Those experts argue that reliable data do not exist because human study subjects don't limit their libidos to controlled, specific sex acts. That's why the AIDS Hotline lumps unprotected anal, vaginal and oral sex together in a category it calls "high risk."

The problem with this approach is that it ignores a clear hi-

erarchy of risky behavior that has emerged from the hundreds of thousands of documented cases of AIDS. Receptive anal sex remains the riskiest activity, while it's virtually unheard-of for HIV to be transmitted from vaginal juices during oral sex. What's more, focusing entirely on AIDS might allow people to forget the risks associated with other, far more prevalent STDs. Dr. H. Hunter Handsfield, director of Seattle-King County's STD Control Program, says, "It's hard enough to get people to use condoms for genital sex. It may not be practical to educate them to use condoms for oral sex."

HERE ARE SOME MESSAGES THAT ARE PRACTICAL

- Fully two-thirds of people with genital herpes are unaware that they have it.
- Even people who know they have genital herpes are infectious for three to seven days each year when they have no visible symptoms.
- Oral herpes can be transmitted by kissing.
- Regarding genital warts, the ones you can see may be contagious, but they are virtually harmless for both men and women. CDC guidelines suggest that the goal of removal should be to "get rid of annoying symptoms," and they advise against treatments that cause scarring.
- If you're like one in four men infected with gonorrhea or chlamydia, you don't know you have it.

In these days of AIDS, "Just say no" and "Always wear a condom" are as safe as they are incomplete. For a fuller picture of the dangers out there, turn the page to the "Ground Zero Risk Guide to Sexually Transmitted Diseases."

—JONATHAN GREENBERG