

This FAQ chapter presents the views and experiences of men in relation to oral sex. We begin with quotes from men below, and continue to represent what we have been told in the pages that follow.

I would only have anal sex with someone if I was in a serious relationship. And if it was just screwing around, I wouldn't even give oral sex. So I think I'm quite safe.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

The last time, I guess I hadn't had anal sex so I wasn't worried but they tested me for everything. I was just reconfirming my status. I was more concerned about gonorrhoea and syphilis because you can catch them through oral sex.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

Condoms for anal. I don't know anyone who'd use a condom for oral. If he insisted on that I'd be worried it meant he was HIV positive and he wasn't telling me. No-one wants to catch anything but other than HIV it can all be treated. Protection diminishes sexual enjoyment.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

I've been told condoms for oral but I know the science and it would be silly to do that. A lot of it stems from cuts in your mouth, or if a guy comes in your mouth, but diluting factors down protects you. Dilutes risk.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative)

They did say the safest option was to have oral sex with a condom but that's not an option. I don't know anybody who does that.

(Gay, 45+ HIV negative)

How common it is to get an STI from oral sex?

(Online respondent)

FAQ Scotland is part of a larger project that wants to prevent HIV infections in Scotland among gay and bisexual men. The larger project is called an HIV Needs Assessment, undertaken by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lothian. For more about FAQ and other FAQ chapters go to [www.faqscotland.co.uk](http://www.faqscotland.co.uk)

## OVERVIEW

### What we learned from men about their experiences:

- Men report that giving and receiving oral sex is part of most sexual encounters.
- While 60% of men responding to our FAQ online survey express some level of worry about STI transmission during oral sex, the remainder do not or have not thought about it. Men who have *not* attended a sexual health clinic report less worry about the risk of STIs from oral sex.
- In general, men consider oral sex as low risk for HIV transmission.
- Men (across all ages and sexual orientation) report that they generally do not and would not consider using condoms for oral sex.
- Some men are aware of the risks of STI and HIV transmission due to cuts or bleeding gums, others avoid taking ejaculate in their mouths.
- Men consider HIV risk increases in terms of oral sex with a partner who is HIV positive.
- When it comes to discussing oral sex only 1 in 4 online respondents had discussed the issue at a clinic, but 3 in 4 men would do so. While gay and bisexual men are equally willing to discuss oral sex, gay men are more likely than bisexual men to have done so in the past.
- FAQ contributors want accurate information about STI and HIV risk but reject any suggestion by clinical staff that men should wear condoms for oral sex. The suggestion of condom use is often perceived of as a marker of how out of touch a member of staff must be with gay and bisexual men's sexual experiences and enjoyment.
- While men generally believe oral sex is 'safer' than anal sex, and that condom use for oral sex is not a serious consideration, they remain concerned about STI/HIV risk and seek assurances and good information on the matter.

### What the findings mean for HIV prevention and HIV/Sexual Health clinical services:

- HIV/Sexual Health clinical staff need to talk with men about oral sex. Useful conversations about oral sex should be framed by an acceptance of oral sex as a regular and important part of gay and bisexual men's sexual lives.
- In the context of men rejecting condom use for oral sex, clinic staff need to talk with men so that they can be aware of the concerns men have about HIV/STI risks, answer questions, and provide the best advice to minimise risk of infections.
- Men who do not attend sexual health services also need to access information about oral sex and minimising risk; other means of engaging with these men should be identified so that accurate information is available to them.

### Reflective questions for practitioners

Throughout FAQ reporting we ask individual practitioners, teams and services to read the detail of findings and then reflect on important questions.

- How do I approach a conversation with a man about oral sex?
- In my conversations with men what do I focus on: risk or pleasure?
- How do I ensure my conversations about oral sex are individual and personalised, based on what I know or need to know about the man in front of me? For example, would my advice on condom use be the same for a man in a relationship as for a man having oral sex with multiple partners?
- How do I respond (verbally and in my body language) to a rejection of condom use for oral sex?
- Knowing that men reject messages about condom use for oral sex, what other strategies to minimise STI/HIV risk am I aware of? And which ones am I comfortable in promoting?

More about the FAQ approach and project participants in the **About FAQ** chapter.

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Throughout the chapter, direct quotes from participating men appear **in blue**. When direct quotes are taken from an FAQ telephone interview, it is possible to identify sexual orientation, age category and HIV status (actual or perceived); an internal interview code is also given. Quotes taken from online responses are labelled as such.

### INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS

Men commented on oral sex both in FAQ interviews and via a thematic online survey called **Oral Sex**.

In FAQ interviews, we did not ask men specifically about oral sex, but their responses came in answers to open/general questions about the sex they have. These were about condom use, whether a sexual partner’s HIV status would matter to them, about how the individual protects himself from HIV infection/transmission and a series of questions about engagement with staff in sexual health services.

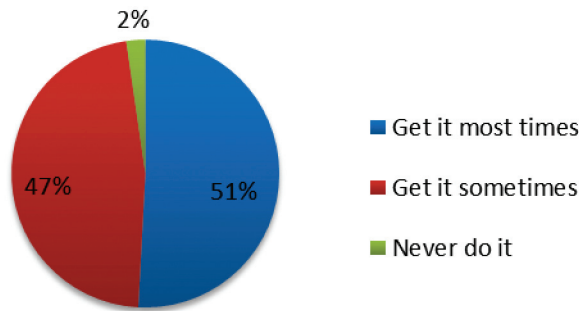
The FAQ survey called **Oral**, received a total of 177 responses. It asked men a range of questions including; how important oral sex is to them, whether they have or would discuss oral sex at a sexual health clinic, whether they worry about HIV/STI risk via oral sex, views on condom use and oral sex, other strategies for HIV/STI prevention and whether they had any questions about oral sex.

**FINDINGS**

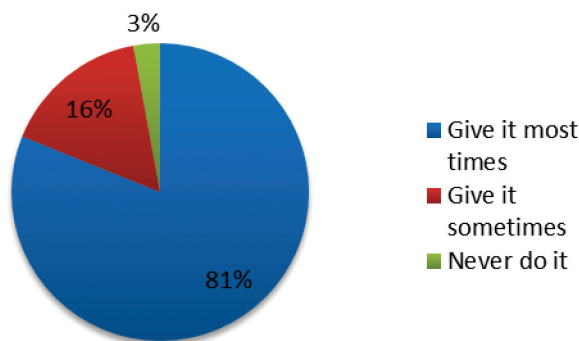
**The importance of oral sex**

In both the FAQ online survey and in FAQ interviews, men talk about the importance of oral sex, responses locate oral sex as a central part of sex between men. From the **Oral Sex** survey, we find that giving and receiving oral sex is part of most sexual encounters.

**How important is receiving oral sex? (n=175)**



**How important is giving oral sex? (n=175)**



Some men interviewed in the FAQ project consider oral sex an intimate part of sex with a partner, and may choose not to have oral sex out with a relationship.

*I would only have anal sex with someone if I was in a serious relationship. And if it was just screwing around, I wouldn't even give oral sex. So I think I'm quite safe.*

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/064)

*I don't do oral sex unless I'm in a relationship.*

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/094)

Some men do not necessarily think of oral sex as 'sex', perhaps it is less than they would consider anal sex which for them would be 'proper' or 'full sex'. In this case men might share these respondents view of oral sex (we discuss this further in the FAQ **Anal Sex** chapter).

*It was kind of like not sex. I don't consider oral sex to be sex.*

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/057)

*It's just I went to one guy's house and all he wanted was oral. I was disappointed. If it's not penetrative, it's just not worth it.*

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/104)

### Oral sex and STIs/HIV

Men reflect on the risk of HIV acquisition in both FAQ interviews and in the **Oral Sex** survey.

The **Oral Sex** survey asked men if they ever worry about risk of STIs/HIV in relation to oral sex. While half of men responding report they worry a little, and 1 in 10 a lot, the remaining 4 in 10 do not worry or have never thought about it.

We were interested to see if there were associations between worrying about the risks of STIs during oral sex and sexual orientation; based on survey responses we cannot conclude that gay men, relative to bisexual men, worry more or less about the risks of contracting an STI during oral sex.

Furthermore, we were interested in the behaviour of men who had *never attended* a sexual health clinic, specifically, associations between worrying about the risk of STIs and going to a sexual health clinic in the past. Although not statistically significant, those men who had *never attended* a clinic report they worry less: roughly equal proportions of clinic non-attenders report worrying (54.5%) and not worrying about the risks of STIs (45.5%) whereas among those men who *had attended* a clinic in the past 70% of these men said they worry about the risks and 30% said they did not.

Overall, in FAQ interviews, men identify oral sex as low level in terms of risk for HIV transmission but recognise a higher risk of acquiring other STIs from oral sex.

*The last time, I guess I hadn't had anal sex so I wasn't worried but they tested me for everything. I was just reconfirming my status. I was more concerned about gonorrhoea and syphilis because you can catch them through oral sex.*

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/061)

The online survey also asked men if they would wear a condom for oral sex or would want a sexual partner to do so. The vast majority of men (83.2%) say 'no' while a smaller number (15%) say they sometimes do. Only 1.7% of respondents say they always do.

Tests were performed to look for associations between whether or not men would want a sexual partner to wear a condom, or if they would be willing to wear one, and age or sexual orientation. Based on the results from the **Oral Sex** survey gay and bisexual men and men of all age categories are equally more or less willing to wear a condom during oral sex or expect a partner to do so.

From the FAQ interviews it is clear that for the most part men do not, and would not, use condoms when having oral sex.

*If I have anal sex, I use condoms. But I don't use condoms for oral sex. The only thing is I don't brush my teeth. I'm not into anything that would involve blood or other fluids.*

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/013)

One FAQ interviewee indicates that any suggestion of condom use for oral sex would suggest to him that a sexual partner was HIV positive.

*Condoms for anal. I don't know anyone who'd use a condom for oral. If he insisted on that I'd be worried it meant he was HIV positive and he wasn't telling me. No-one wants to catch anything but other than HIV it can all be treated. Protection diminishes sexual enjoyment.*

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/113)

In FAQ interviews, men did report strategies for HIV/STI prevention when it comes to oral sex. Men know about STI/HIV transmission risks and identify risk associated with cuts in their mouth, bleeding gums and maintaining good oral hygiene. Strategies might also include not allowing ejaculate in their mouth.

I don't take cum in my mouth, I don't swallow.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/071)

I do follow advice like not brushing my teeth beforehand and things like that... My gums do bleed sometimes so if I've been feeling like my mouth is exposed with sores or anything like that I don't have oral.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/007)

I've been told condoms for oral but I know the science and it would be silly to do that. A lot of it stems from cuts in your mouth, or if a guy comes in your mouth, but diluting factors down protects you. Dilutes risk.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/118)

I take good care of my gums, I go to the dentist and take good care of my gums and teeth, so looking after my oral health is just looking after my orals sex. I don't let the guy ejaculate in my mouth. I'll probably be swallowing some pre-cum but the difference between pre-cum and ejaculate is big.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/003)

For one FAQ interviewee, lack of awareness regarding oral sex and risk led to HIV infection.

I had classic sero-conversion of flu but not flu. I had a rash on my chest. I had friends who were HIV positive so I knew their stories so I put 2 and 2 together. I wasn't having unprotected sex however I was cottaging quite a bit and I had half a broken tooth, so I think it was through that. Apparently it's not very common, but half the tooth was missing down to the root. My doctors said that that was likely. I hadn't had unprotected sex, condoms hadn't split or anything like that but I enjoy sucking cock. Yes, I was taking cum in my mouth. The problem with my tooth didn't occur to me at all.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV positive, I1/068)

For some men consideration of HIV transmission risk and oral sex comes to the fore explicitly if their sexual partner is known to be HIV positive. (We discuss how men know the status of a sexual partner and assumptions which can be made in assessing HIV status in the FAQ chapter **HIV Status/Talking about HIV**).

I mean I don't take stupid risks. I'm very serious nowadays about being safe sexually. I have friends with HIV and I just don't see any issue with it whatsoever. Just a normal person. I maybe would be a bit more cautious about oral sex. Like if I had a really sore throat I wouldn't have oral sex with a guy with HIV.

(Bisexual, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/036)

Obviously I don't have unprotected sex with random strangers so it would be safe sex. But if he told me he was HIV positive I would be a lot more careful. I don't use a condom for oral; I think I'm part of the majority. I would make sure that I didn't have any cuts on my penis and he didn't have any cuts on his mouth etc. I'd make sure that I didn't have cuts in my mouth and obviously he didn't in his penis. Just to make everything as safe as it possibly could be.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, 11/051)

I don't suck the other guy off unless I know his HIV status and make sure his ejaculation won't be inside me or near any cuts on my body. I try to limit kissing unless in a relationship. I also bath myself in HiBiscrub, which is a body wash just to make sure I'm less likely to contract an STI. Also the main thing is knowing my partner's HIV status.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, 11/072)

In an open question in the FAQ thematic survey we asked men *if you give/get oral sex what do you do to make sure you don't get a STI/HIV?* The men suggest the following strategies (with numbers of men identifying each).

- Not allowing a sexual partner to ejaculate in my mouth/not swallowing ejaculate (16 men)
- Only have oral sex with my partner (9 men)
- Visually check the man's penis/make sure he's clean (8 men)
- Ensure my mouth has no cuts, ulcers, sore gum or throat (8 men)
- Get regular check-ups at the clinic (7 men)
- Use a condom (7 men)
- Use a mouthwash before or after oral sex (6 men)
- Don't brush my teeth before (3 men)
- Don't have oral sex with unknown men/men who I know have lots of partners (3 men)
- Make sure my partner doesn't bite/is too rough (2 men)
- Brush my teeth before oral sex (1 man)
- Ask his HIV status (1 man)

### Discussing oral sex at a sexual health service

The **Oral Sex** survey asked men two questions in relation to services: *have you ever discussed oral sex with someone at a sexual health clinic* and *would you ever do so?* While only 1 in 4 respondents had discussed the issue at a clinic nearly 3 in 4 would do so.

Tests were performed to see if there was association between ever discussing oral sex with someone at a sexual health clinic and sexual orientation. Although not statistically significant, a higher proportion of gay men (29.5%) report discussing oral sex at a clinic at some point in the past compared to the number of bisexual men (17.6%) who had. When we look at willingness to discuss oral sex in future visits to a clinic we find similar proportions of gay (76.2%) and bisexual men (74%) who would be willing to discuss oral sex at a clinic, with very few reporting that they would never discuss it.

In FAQ interviews men also comment on sexual health clinics as a setting for discussion of oral sex. A common theme across FAQ interviews was an experience of having clinic staff propose that men should wear a condom for oral sex. Men's accounts of these interactions suggest they are unlikely to take it on board with some interviewees regarding this advice as 'lecturing' or simply unrealistic.

I do have a chat then, not really a chat, they just ask about my sex life and how safe I've been. We do have a chat about STIs. They ask if I use a condom in oral sex and I answer no and then I get this speech about how important it is to use condoms in oral sex. And I sit there and nod my head politely until they stop talking.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/041)

I always wear a condom if I'm having anal sex. I don't believe in condoms for oral sex. You know when you go to get a sexual health screening, if you listened to all the lectures they give you'd never have sex again. As a top only guy, I have very little risk but I use condoms. I know there are minimal risks in other areas, oral sex and like that.

(Bisexual, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/036)

But last time I went, it didn't feel like there was much conversation offered, just obvious questions, no discussion of any detail. One of the Health Advisors said I should be using condoms if I'm giving oral sex, she said I'd be exposed to all sorts. My response was 'well you're not going to give much oral sex if you use condoms'. That was the end of that conversation, a breakdown in the consultation.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/023)

Reiterating this rejection of condom use for oral sex, the issue of advice on the matter came up in several responses to the FAQ interview question: *Did the doctor, nurse or health advisor give you any advice or suggest you do anything when it comes to the sex you are having that you just won't do?*

They did say the safest option was to have oral sex with a condom but that's not an option. I don't know anybody who does that.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/081)

Wearing a condom while giving oral sex... They are up on statistics and treatments but they need to understand there's one per cent of the population that will use a condom for oral sex.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/051)

Yes, very much so, she'll say the importance of using condoms including for oral sex but I've said I could name on one hand number of guys who'd use a condom for oral sex.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/048)

Using condoms for oral sex. They said it would minimise the risks of infections. It's just not something I'd ever consider.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/018)



One FAQ interviewee reports that when he raised the issue of condom use and oral sex in a consultation, the staff member did not pursue discussion.

I remember saying when they asked if I was using condoms I said yes, but not for oral and it seemed like quite a flippant remark when they said nobody does. They knew they were onto a losing battle. I didn't use condoms for oral after that.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/060)

It seems that any attempt to encourage men to use condoms for oral sex results in gay and bisexual men managing the conversation by lying.

They asked me questions about what contact, what sex I had, but basic. I just tell them I've used condoms, for the most part I do. But you had said previously you don't always? Yes, but they say use condoms for things like oral and that would be crazy so you just say the same things.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/115)

### Questions about oral sex

In the course of FAQ interviews and via the **Oral Sex** survey, FAQ gave men the opportunity to ask questions they might have about oral sex; specifically in the survey an open question asked: *If you could ask any questions about oral sex, what would you like to know?*

The dominant theme was about risk of STI and HIV infection from oral sex; 4 FAQ interviewees posed such questions and 40 online respondents asked questions on this issue. While some questions were general, asking what are the risks of oral sex, others were more specific, for example seeking guidance on allowing a man to ejaculate in their mouth or not. Some men also want 'facts and figures' about levels of STI/HIV transmission from oral sex. These questions are typical of those posed:

Maybe some statistics around oral sex, unprotected would help. Anal sex I'm pretty sure I know all the facts.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/010)

I've always never been 100% sure about oral and swallowing cum. Mixed reviews. What is the safety of that?

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/112)

I have questions about oral and rimming, about safe that is.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/019)

Can the HIV virus be contracted though oral sex either way?

(Online respondent)

How common it is to get an STI from oral sex?

(Online respondent)

If a guy cums unexpectedly in your mouth should you spit or swallow?

(Online respondent)

Whether or not HIV passes through saliva and mouth fluids that are produced by oral sex?

(Online respondent)

How unsafe is it really to suck and swallow? I mean, people talk about viral load, but how likely is it to be dangerous?

(Online respondent)

It seems that while men generally believe oral sex is 'safer' than anal sex, and that condom use for oral sex is not a serious consideration, they remain concerned about STI/HIV risk and seek assurances and good information on the matter.

Individual men asked further questions in the FAQ survey which focus on: how best to give oral sex; the general safety/health impact of oral sex; whether to use a mouthwash before or after oral sex; whether it is possible to tell a man has an STI from examining his penis; and whether it is 'the law' that a man should wear a condom for oral sex.