Abstinence is not the safest sex, or is it? [1]

Dear Alice,

I am commenting on the common saying that the safest sex is abstinence. This is a common catch-phrase used by sex educators and I have read it in a few of your readers' comments and questions. The thing I would like to point out is that abstinence is not the safest sex because it is NOT sex at all! That's like saying the safest way to fly is to stay on the ground, or the safest way to swim is to stay on the shore. It's absolutely ridiculous! We all know that the risks of sex are not present in an abstinent lifestyle, because in an abstinent lifestyle there is no sex. The safety benefits of abstinence are not a startling revelation to any of us; we are well aware. But it is just dumb to say that abstinence is safe sex because it's not sex! Would everyone please stop using this ridiculous slogan!!

Signed,
Let's be honest

Answer
Dear Let's be honest,

According to your comments, "abstinence is... not sex" and, therefore, "the risks of sex are not present." For those people who define abstinence as not being sexual in any way, you are absolutely right: there’s no risk of getting a sexually transmitted infections (STI) or becoming pregnant.

But "abstinence" means different things to different people. So does the word "sex." The meanings behind our definitions of sex and abstinence often have more to do with our cultural background, past experiences, and how we feel about ourselves than with any "universal" definition of what is safe in terms of STIs and pregnancy. For some, no matter who their partner is, having oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse is "having sex," and everything else is a form of abstinence. Some people consider themselves to be having sex if they touch themselves or their partner sexually, rub against their partner without clothes on, or stimulate each other in other ways. For others, giving and getting oral or anal sex is part of being abstinent.

What your response emphasizes is the importance of being clear and specific about each of our definitions of sex and abstinence. Learning to communicate what we feel comfortable doing, and what we don't, is an essential part of any intimate relationship.

Alice!
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About Abstinence [4]
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's) [5]

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