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[Home](#) > [Abstinence is not the safest sex, or is it?](#)

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,

You make a valid point. However, the terms "[abstinence](#) ^[2]" and "sex" may mean different things to different people. You shared that, "abstinence is... not sex" and, therefore, "the risks of sex are not present." For folks who define abstinence as no sexual contact in any way, you're absolutely right: there's little risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or becoming pregnant. But, what about those who don't define abstinence that way? And, what if another person's definition of sex differs from yours (see [Definition of sex?](#) ^[3] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives for a number of possible definitions)? All things considered, the "safest" sex situation gets a bit more complicated.

The meanings behind sex and abstinence may have more to do with a person's cultural background, personal experiences, and upbringing than with any universal definition. For some, having oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse is "having sex," and anything else (kissing, [mutual masturbation](#) ^[4], [dry humping](#) ^[5], etc.) is a form of abstinence. Other folks may 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. While others consider only

vaginal intercourse as having sex, so giving and getting oral or anal sex is part of being abstinent.

With these various perspectives in mind, a person's definition of what is (and is not) sex can play into what risk may be involved with selected activities. For example, for those that consider oral sex to be part of their plan for abstinence, it's good to know that they may still run the risk of STI transmission [6]. So, it may help for folks to chat with their partner(s) on what they consider sex and abstinence. Then, they can make a plan for how to reduce the risk of STIs or pregnancy (depending on the sexual activity in question). If you're interested in learning more about what risks may be involved in certain sexual acts, take a look at the *Go Ask Alice!* Sexual and Reproductive Health [7] archives. It may also be helpful to talk with a health care provider or a health promotion specialist about different sexual behaviors, any potential risks, and how to minimize those risks.

Thanks for sharing your insight and hopefully this helps bring a little nuance to the topic.

Alice!

Category:

Sexual & Reproductive Health [8]

Safer Sex [9]

Sexual Questions [10]

About Abstinence [11]

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) [12]

Related questions

Abstinent and horny [13]

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Tired of oral sex — Should we move onto intercourse? [15]

Is ejaculating on breasts considered safer sex? [16]

Sex during period... on pill... Safe? [17]

Is pulling out safe? [18]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [19]

Alice! Health Promotion (Morningside) [20]

Medical Services (CUIMC) [21]

Center for Student Wellness (CUIMC) [22]

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Footer menu

▼ Contact Alice!

- [Content Use](#)
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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/abstinence-not-safest-sex-or-it-0>
- [2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/where-can-i-find-information-about-abstinence>
- [3] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/definition-sex>
- [4] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/mutual-masturbation-4>
- [5] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/bed-humping-bad-habit>
- [6] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/oral-sex-risks-no-condom>
- [7] <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-reproductive-health>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-reproductive-health>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/safer-sex>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-questions>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/about-abstinence>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/abstinent-and-horny-0>
- [14] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-outercourse>
- [15] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/tired-oral-sex-%E2%80%94-should-we-move-intercourse>
- [16] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/ejaculating-breasts-considered-safer-sex>
- [17] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sex-during-period-pill-safe>
- [18] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/pulling-out-safe-0>
- [19] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [20] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/alice-health-promotion-morningside>
- [21] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>
- [22] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/center-student-wellness-cuimc>