Dear Alice,

How do you define a virgin? I have never had any sexual intercourse. However, I live in with my girlfriend and we often have "intimate actions" and oral sex. Are we still considered virgins?

Sign me,
Cherry picker

Answer

Dear Cherry picker,

Confusing as it may be, the simplicity of your question belies the complex definition of the term "virgin." There is no one definition of virgin. To some, a virgin is someone who hasn't had sexual intercourse (that is, penis-in-vagina intercourse). To others, a virgin is a person who hasn’t engaged in any intimate acts, including deep kissing, genital touching, and oral, vaginal, or anal sex. There are also individuals who allow certain intimacies, like kissing and touching below the belt, while excluding other sex acts. Some people believe they’re a virgin until they have sex with someone of a different gender, while others believe that people who exclusively have same-gender partners can and do lose their virginity. Finally, some believe that people who have been sexually assaulted, but have not had consensual sex, are still virgins.

Why the variation? Definitions of virginity are often deeply personal and frequently stem from religious, cultural, historical, and family influences that emphasize different values. Historically speaking, “virgin” was a term used to describe a woman (or a goddess) who was autonomous, or on her own, not owned by any man. The definition has changed over time to focus more on sexual virginity. In the past, and in some cultures today, virginity among those with hymens was tested by checking if there was blood after they had penetrative sex for the first time. The hymen is a thin tissue near the vaginal opening that may stretch when having sex for the first time, causing pain or bleeding. Research has shown that equating virginity with a stretched hymen isn’t an accurate measure as some individuals may have tissue that’s naturally more open, while others may have stretched their hymen during other activities. There hasn’t been an analogous test for those with penises.
Given the changes in the definition of “virgin” over time, it's not unusual to question whether you're still a virgin, and if so, whether or how long you wish to remain a virgin. It's also common to come up with your own definition of what it means to you. This may be an opportunity for you and your girlfriend to open the conversation about the many ways of being sexually and emotionally intimate. Maybe you can reach a definition to which you both agree. You might start by thinking about these questions: Is being a virgin of value to you, your partner, and or your family? How so? What behaviors are included in identifying as a virgin or not?

Like so many of life's grey areas, only you can determine if you're "still a virgin." You might find guidance from your partner, family, friends, a health promotion specialist, a medical professional, religious leaders, teachers, counselors, books, articles, or other sources. Ultimately, defining such a seemingly simple word could lead to a rich process of self-discovery and growth. Enjoy the journey!

Alice!
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