Alice,

I have read about men and women having sex with animals, e.g., dogs (Women On Top, by Nancy Friday, Simon & Schuster, 1991). Apart from it being against the law (I think), are there medical reasons why this is not a good idea? For example, are there STDs that can be passed from animals to humans? Are there immunological consequences from depositing sperm into the vagina of another species? Is this kind of sex common?

— Sheep herder

Answer

Dear Sheep herder,

Humans having sex with animals, otherwise called bestiality or zoophilia, is believed to be fairly uncommon, but because of the stigmatization associated with this behavior, research and data is limited. Zoophilia is sometimes distinguished from bestiality as incorporating a relationship or emotional attachment with an animal, in addition to sexual contact.

Although data is scarce, we do know that having sex with animals may transmit infections. Contact with animals can put the person at risk for worms, fleas, ticks, salmonella, campylobacteriosis, scabies, and possibly viruses. For more information, see the related Q&As.

Human relationships with animals have been a topic of interest for people for hundreds of years. Tales of human-animal sexual contact can be found throughout ancient folklore and mythology. A good example is the story of Zeus, who in the form of a swan, had sexual intercourse with Leda, the queen of Sparta. William Butler Yeats used this story as background for a famous poem. Greek and Roman mythology have portrayed females having sexual relationships with bears, apes, bulls, goats, horses, wolves, snakes, and crocodiles. Humans have enjoyed rich sexual fantasies throughout the ages, sometimes including the fantastic and the unreal. That said, consider this quote from poet Octavio Paz in his essay At Table and In Bed, on the nature of sexuality, "Eroticism is a representation, a ceremony of transfiguration: men and women make love like lions, eagles, doves, or praying mantises; neither lions nor praying mantises make love like human beings. We humans see ourselves in animals; animals do not see themselves in
The research that does exist suggests that most people who have sex with animals are men, but there have been some documented cases of women caressing and stimulating animals in an attempt to insert the penis of a dog or horse into their vagina. In either case, the frequency of human-animal sexual contact is believed to be low, and is believed to have decreased along with the decline in rural farm areas in the U.S.

Alfred Kinsey's comprehensive (though dated) studies of sexuality are some of the only data we have on bestiality. After conducting 6000 exhaustive interviews with participants on their sexual histories, Kinsey published his findings in 1953, which included this data on zoophilia:

- Eight percent of men and four percent of women reported having had a sexual experience with animals at some point in their lives
- For women, the animals involved were most commonly dogs and cats, and the sexual activities most often reported were general body contacts with the animals, and cunnilingus performed by animals
- Female intercourse with an animal was rarely reported
- Eight percent of men brought themselves to orgasm with an animal

Male animal contact is believed to be more common, although the total percentages still remain quite low. In Morton Hunt's study (1974) 4.9 percent of men brought themselves to orgasm with animal contact. Male sexual contact with animals was more common among rural farm dwellers than urban men. Coitus was the most common sexual activity, usually with animals, such as calves, sheep, and burros. For both males and females, sexual encounters with animals were most likely to have occurred before puberty, and to have been sporadic encounters with little consequence on sexual development.

Historically, taboos against human-animal contact have been quite severe. In 1953, 49 U.S. states and territories regarded bestiality as a felony or its equivalent. Many such laws remain to this day, although enforcement varies. In addition to the legal and health concerns, sexual contact with animals is usually considered a form of animal cruelty because it can seriously injure the animal, and the animal does not have the capacity to "give consent." While curiosity about sexual contact with animals may be normal, and people may develop emotional bonds with pets or other animals, given these risks and concerns, it's probably best for zoophilia to remain within the realms of fantasy rather than practice.
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