HIV risk from finger in vagina? [1]

Dear Alice,

While I found a lot of info on oral sex and AIDS on this blissfully honest site, there didn't seem to be any info on "fingering" (not sure of the technical term?) a woman. I'm in a high risk AIDS country and recently "used my fingers" for a couple of minutes to delight a local woman who has turned out to be having her period. After noticing a considerable amount of bloody discharge, we stopped. But do I have a considerable AIDS risk? There were no cuts on the fingers I used but a small, possibly healed, cut on the thumb of the same hand. Break it down for me. I'm a bit on edge.

Been to John Jay

Answer

Dear Been to John Jay,

Fingering (stimulating the vagina with a finger or two) is not a likely route for HIV transmission. People are primarily infected by vaginal and anal intercourse, through sharing of needles, from an HIV positive mother to her unborn child, and via breast milk.

There is a theoretical risk of infection by fingering a woman, as vaginal fluids and menstrual blood can carry HIV, but the virus would have to enter your blood stream in order for you to become infected. If the woman you were with was HIV positive, what you describe sounds like a low risk activity. Whether a sexual activity is safer or not depends on the chances of your partner's body fluids coming into contact with your blood and/or mucous membranes. Since you had an old cut on a thumb that was probably healed, the fluid contact is likely to be minimal and pose little or no risk for infection. On the other hand (no pun intended), fingering may cause an infection for the recipient if cuts are created by sharp or jagged nails and if the fingers and areas under the nails are not clean.

The viral load of an HIV positive woman is highest during active menstruation, and there is a higher risk for all sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when an infected woman is menstruating. If you don't know the status of your partner, you can reduce your risk by using a barrier method of protection (such as a male or female condom, dam, finger condom or cot, or latex glove)
consistently, whether or not a woman has her period. Sometimes, as we know, the supplies are not always around when you need them. Maybe it makes sense to stock up before your fingers do the walking.

HIV is not an easy virus to pass from one person to another. It is a fragile organism, and its survival outside the body is estimated by scientists to be just a fraction of a second. Again, based on what you described in your question, it seems highly unlikely that HIV was passed to you, if your partner even has it to pass. If you continue to be concerned, getting an HIV test may help ease your mind.

If you do get tested, make sure to tell the clinician who administers the test what country you were in at the time of your sexual activity. There are two identified types of HIV, and some countries do not routinely test for both, although tests for HIV-1 detect the presence of HIV-2 about 70 percent of the time. HIV-2, by the way, is found mostly in western Africa.

Alice!
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