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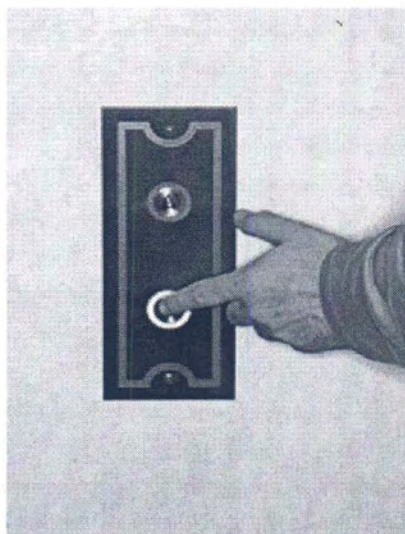
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The Voyeur: Going Down

Disagreements about oral sex can send any relationship into a tailspin, finds **Ky Henderson**. That's why couples need to talk it out before venturing below the belt. *Names in this story have been changed.



There may be no intimate act portrayed more unfavorably in the media than oral sex. Every time it's in the news, people who shouldn't be doing it are doing it somewhere they shouldn't be doing it.

Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky ruined cheap dresses and expensive cigars in the Oval Office. Chloe Sevigny serviced the ever-grimy Vincent Gallo— with no camera tricks—at the end of the atrocious 2003 film *The Brown Bunny*. And, as a report released late last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed, half the teenagers in America are having oral sex, quite possibly in the rec room.

But even years of bad publicity can't explain why this particular act is often a source of dissatisfaction and anxiety for couples. Oral sex is arguably even more intimate than intercourse. It can be intensely pleasurable for men and—because of direct clitoral stimulation that's all but impossible during intercourse—especially women.

Problems arise, however, because oral sex can tap into a wide range of insecurities, fears, and neuroses. Pleasuring someone is usually a solo

performance, which can be nerve-racking. If you're giving it, you need to be extremely comfortable with, as biologists say, your partner's crotch. Conversely, if you're receiving it, you need to be extremely comfortable with your own. The net result can leave one or both partners wanting more, wanting less— or simply wanting to beat their heads against a wall.

"Oral sex is one of the most highly erotic, loving, and satisfying sexual activities you can indulge in," says Dr. Ava Cadell, a sex therapist and the author of *The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Oral Sex*. "It's part and parcel of being a great lover. So if one person wants it and the other doesn't, it can be a deal breaker in a relationship."

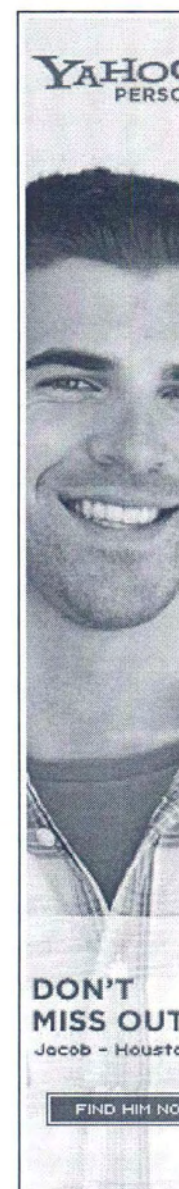
According to the CDC, about 90 percent of men and women have had oral sex at some point in their lives— but that doesn't mean they continue to have it regularly, or even that they liked it in the first place. The reasons why some folks aren't up on going down are a Freudian's, er, wet dream: People fear it's unhygienic. Or they dislike the taste. Or they worry their technique is bad. Or they simply find the idea of faces being in places swimsuits cover to be generally unpleasant.

You should never do anything that makes you uncomfortable—but you should do what you can to overcome hang-ups that limit not only your own pleasure, but your partner's as well. And almost any hesitation about oral sex can be solved with a simple explanation or a reasonable compromise. "If it's a question of cleanliness, you can shower with your partner and get clean together," suggests Ian Kerner, author of *She Comes First and He Comes Next*. "If a guy feels it's distasteful, he needs to know that the vagina is a self-cleaning ecosystem. By the same token, a woman may want to combine oral with manual stimulation to avoid swallowing, and ask her boyfriend not to thrust if she's afraid of gagging. You just have to work in slow steps."

Or lightning-fast ones, depending on the nature of your motivation. Tiffany*, a 27-year-old banker, had been dating her boyfriend Peter for about eight months, but she had never performed fellatio on him. "I didn't enjoy it," says Tiffany. "But one evening we were out with his friends and I overheard them refer to to his ex with a nickname that strongly implied she was good at giving head. I got jealous, so that night I went down on him with the goal of outperforming her. He went nuts, which I loved."

If you don't have such stiff competition to spur you on, note that the receiver shouldn't be the only person who is enjoying himself. Watching your partner get turned on because of your expertise— and you have a remarkable vantage point from which to do so—is extremely pleasurable in itself. If one person truly enjoys giving but dislikes receiving, there's nothing wrong with a one-way street. But it doesn't have to be.

"People who don't enjoy oral sex generally have a psychological block," Dr. Cadell



says. "Like any other sexual activity, it all starts between the ears."

It can also start at the bargaining table. Angela, a 32-year old nurse, and her boyfriend, Vince, had a problem that apparently plagues all stand-up comics: At the end of the day, he wanted sex; she was tired and just wanted a massage. "I jokingly suggested that if he would give me a massage that night, I'd give him a blow job when I was more awake the next day," explains Angela. "He was totally into the idea. Although he was much better about keeping his commitment. I don't like to give blow jobs when I'm not in the mood for sex." Caution: Don't let lovemaking become a bargaining chip in your relationship or it will soon have all the luster of taking out the garbage or picking up dry cleaning. Instead, make the arrangement a game that everybody wins.

And speaking of winners, Trudy's friends nearly choked on their chardonnay when the 25-year-old human resources manager described her husband's, uh, spirited oral sex demands. "He goes down on me pretty much every night," says Trudy, who's clearly blessed with the luck of all the shamrock-picking drunks in Ireland. "In fact it isn't unusual for me to get a little tired of it and try to pull him up. Sometimes he relents, but other times he's more persistent and insists on making me orgasm." The poor woman confesses that oral activity always leads to good ol' fashioned sex. But does it also mean she must go down on him every night? Not by a long shot. Their arrangement works because both people end up satisfied.

Regardless of the politics in your bedroom, the point is to give oral sex, and yourself, and your partner, a chance. "Don't let fear determine what you do—let pleasure," suggests Dr. Sharna L. Striar, a certified sex therapist in New York City.

"It's fun, it adds variety, it heightens pleasure. But it's a very intimate act, and because one person is so exposed, it's also very private. So you need to communicate your wants and needs."

But please, do so before going down on your partner. It's not polite to talk with ... well, you get the idea.

Ky Henderson is a freelance writer in New York City.

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