

Study shows behaviors and attitudes towards oral sex are changing

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University of Alberta researcher Brea Malacad says results from a study on oral sex indicate there is little doubt that oral sex is becoming a more common activity for young women. Study results show the act has become a fundamental part of what Malacad calls the "sexual revolution of the 21st century". And she concludes that researchers, sex educators and marketers of safer-sex paraphernalia need to catch up with the trend.

"From my study, all of the women who had engaged in sexual intercourse had also engaged in oral sex as well," said Malacad, who recently published the findings in the *European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care*. "This data tells us that oral sex is becoming very much a part of most young people's sexual repertoire."

Viral urban myths such as rainbow parties (an alleged group-sex event where women, all wearing different colored lipstick, perform oral sex on men) and media reports of the "exploitation and over-sexualization of young women," as Malacad explains it, was part of the decision to undertake the study to understand what young women are really doing and what it means for the teens, parents and for [sex education](#) in general.

Malacad's findings reveal that behaviours and attitudes towards oral sex are changing. Her research shows that while 50 per cent of respondents viewed oral sex as a less intimate activity than intercourse, 41 per cent believe oral sex to be as intimate an act as intercourse and the remaining nine per cent view it as more intimate than intercourse. And while Malacad's findings indicate that certainly oral sex has become more accepted, she says the act is hardly the "new goodnight kiss" among young people as has been suggested in some media reports.

The participants' [emotional response](#) to oral sex was also something that surprised her.

"Both intercourse and oral sex were associated with mostly positive emotions overall, which suggests that most young women are engaging in these activities because they enjoy them," said Malacad. "Based on the results of my study, there is a percentage of women (just over 30 per cent) who feel powerful when performing fellatio. Apparently some women find it empowering and believe that it can wield a lot of power."

There is an air of caution, she notes, before parents start locking up their daughters to protect them from rampant sexual behaviour. Of a sample of the 181 participants of Malacad's study who were aged 18 to 25, many had only one sexual partner after becoming sexually active. And 25 per cent of participants had not engaged in any sexual activity at all.

Malacad says that the media sends mixed messages to teenage girls about sexuality. On the one hand, [young women](#) are criticized for being oversexualized, and on the other, they are encouraged to freely express their sexuality. She refers to Kim Cattrall's character Samantha in the *Sex and the City* television series, a woman who was strong, independent, empowered and who very sexually aggressive, as being a role model for women to be accepted as sexual beings.

"I guess, depending on the perspective, young women's sexuality can be seen as a positive, empowering thing for women or a very negative thing," she said.

This mainstreaming of oral sex is a change in the tide of sexual behaviour; it also means that sex educators need to catch up to the trends, noted Malacad. With many young people still ignorant to the fact that sexually transmitted infections can just as easily be passed orally, a whole new topic of discussion needs to appear in the safer sex curriculum delivered to students. The results of her study also show that there is a seemingly untapped

market for makers of safe-sex products, too.

"Eighty-two per cent of respondents said that they never used protection when engaging in oral sex, compared to only seven per cent for intercourse; it's almost like it didn't occur to them to protect themselves when having oral sex," said Malacad, who teaches the sex-ed teacher delivery course in the Faculty of Education. "I don't think young people are aware that infections can be spread this way and there are options in terms of protecting oneself."

Malacad says that while parents should be a child's first sex educators, not all are comfortable talking about it with their kids, or are ill-informed about the current realities of teens and sex. She says Alberta still leads many provinces in having a mandatory sex education program, and she would like to see a parent component of the program to educate them as well. First, however, that requires educating teachers and pre-service teachers about how—and what—to teach the teens. That talk, she says, goes far beyond basic anatomy.

"In order to provide relevant sex education, we need to get into these difficult topics that have to be talked about: the uncomfortable things that teens really need to know about—sexually transmitted infections and transmission of disease, particularly through oral sex, as well as the social and emotional implications of sexual activity," said Malacad. "We need to be giving them (the most) honest and reliable information in the classroom (possible)."

Provided by University of Alberta

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