

CHAPTER 32

Healthy Sex

Cleanliness is as important with respect to the genitals as it is for any other part of the body. The greater difficulty in cleaning the glans of the uncircumcised penis has led to circumcision being the most commonly performed surgery in the United States and many other countries. In Australia, circumcised males outnumber uncircumcised ones by about three to one. Despite this, a debate over the pros and cons of circumcision has raged for at least the last forty years. It is a fact that more than ten times as many uncircumcised boys get urinary tract infections as do circumcised ones and that cancer of the penis occurs almost exclusively in uncircumcised men. However, good hygiene apparently provides the same benefit in both cases. Studies have also shown that uncircumcised men may be much more likely to contract gonorrhoea, syphilis, genital herpes, thrush, AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases than are other men. When properly performed, the operation is remarkably safe, with minor complications in less than one percent (occasional botched jobs have occurred, in some cases causing the loss of the penis) and deaths almost non-existent. Though proponents and opponents often tend to be almost rabid in their beliefs, it is difficult to establish an overwhelming case for either. If, however, circumcision is not performed, good hygiene is essential. Circumcision may also be necessary in cases of phimosis (where an excessively tight foreskin causes constriction) and in erosive balanitis, in which an infection of the glans causes rapidly ulcerating lesions.

Male circumcision should not be confused with female 'circumcision', which is better called by its alternative name of 'genital mutilation'. Details of the surgery vary. In the mildest form, part or all of the clitoris is removed. In a step up, not only the clitoris but also part or all of the inner lips of the vagina are cut away. The most drastic form involves not only removing these structures but also stitching together the outer lips of the vagina to cover the urethral and vaginal entrances. A new opening is made for the passage of urine and menstrual blood and for sex - but the opening is made very small, to increase the man's enjoyment. The woman must be cut open before childbirth and restitched afterward. Each year two million girls between four and twelve years old in at least 28 African countries have one or other of these operations performed on them in a ritual performed without anaesthesia, in unsanitary conditions, by a person with no medical training using a knife, razor blade or broken bottle. It is supposed to be, not just a coming of age but also an essential procedure that ensures chastity, promotes cleanliness and fertility and enhances the beauty of a woman's body. The pain and bleeding are intense. Those who don't die are plagued throughout their lives by recurrent infections, pain during intercourse, infertility and obstructed labour that can cause babies to be borne dead or brain-damaged.

Only so much can be excused in the name of culture; 'female circumcision' certainly cannot; neither can male circumcision if that is the only reason for its performance.

Women, like men, need to wash their outer genital areas daily with warm water and, perhaps, a gentle soap. However, nearly a third of women go overboard and douche (flush the vagina with water or vinegar or a commercial preparation) regularly. This is completely unnecessary and provides no greater protection from infection or development of odours (or pregnancy) than does ordinary washing. And it can be harmful. Women who douche weekly are nearly four times as likely to develop pelvic inflammatory disease and to experience tubal pregnancy and also have a higher risk of cervical cancer. Rather than rubbing with towels, it is better to pat the area dry or even use a hair dryer on a low setting.

Feminine hygiene deodorant sprays are also completely unnecessary and can be harmful. Many cause irritation and allergic reactions and most interfere with the normal pH balance. If a woman's vagina has an objectionable odour, it is because she has an infection, which should be treated. And women who think these products make them more sexually attractive should think again; the scent of an aroused woman is probably the most powerful aphrodisiac to any man.

Using yogurt in the vagina to treat thrush or suspected thrush is not a good idea. There

are much more effective preparations available and a number of other conditions that may mimic thrush but require different treatment. See your doctor and have a laboratory test to determine the true cause.

Wearing cotton (not nylon) underwear and avoiding tight pants can also help keep non-sexually transmitted infections at bay. Though there is no real evidence for this, it has been suggested that a high-sugar diet can also increase the chance of getting these infections. Whether or not, both women and men should follow a good diet (and get plenty of exercise and physical and mental rest) if they wish to have good sexual, as well as general, health.

Since the advent of AIDS, there has been much discussion and advice about safe sex - though those in the field now tend to speak more of safer, rather than safe, sex. What is usually meant by the term is precautions to help prevent you catching AIDS, though these same precautions will protect you from contracting other sexually transmitted diseases. The most effective way to avoid catching any sexually transmitted disease is to enjoy a relationship with a single partner who is not infected and has no other partners. If one or more of these factors does not apply, you must take precautions. With AIDS, you must: avoid sex practices that involve sharing body fluids; always use condoms; use spermicides containing nonoxynol-9; beware of open sores; and avoid high risk practices (in order: being on the receiving end of anal intercourse; being the active partner in anal intercourse; being a woman having vaginal intercourse; being a man having vaginal intercourse; being the one giving oral sex; sucking the breasts of a lactating woman; sharing penetrative sex toys; being bitten during sex; any sexual play that draws blood; being a participant in French kissing). Ordinary kissing, mutual masturbation, erotic massage, cuddling and simulated intercourse carry no risk.