**Cunnilingus**

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Synonyms

Oral sex; Sexual intercourse

Definition

Oral sex act or stimulation performed by a person on the female genitalia.

Introduction

Cunnilingus is the stimulation of the female genitals by a partner’s lips or tongue. One study of heterosexual female college students indicates that approximately 67% have been on the receiving end of oral sex while 99% of those same students have performed fellatio on a male partner (Bay-Cheng and Fava 2011). This sexual behavior is not only found in humans. For example, the Indian flying fox engages in cunnilingus, and those males who perform cunnilingus before copulation engage in longer copulatory sessions with their mate (Maruthupandian and Marimuthu 2013). It is also common in a number of insects (Gregorič et al. 2016). Although it does not appear to offer direct genetic benefits, performing cunnilingus can be advantageous to engage in for other reasons among humans.

Evolutionary Advantages of Cunnilingus in Humans

Engaging in cunnilingus in adolescence seems to be a proxy for sexual intercourse in the future and may provide the individual with reputational popularity, but not likability from their peers (Prinstein et al. 2003). Additionally, when couples engage in oral sex more frequently, they tend to report more relationship satisfaction (Frederick et al. 2017). Women are also more likely to have an orgasm when they receive cunnilingus (Richters et al. 2006). Aside from positive affect, performing cunnilingus can be beneficial because it can function as a way to influence one’s partner.

For starters, cunnilingus can be a way to combat sperm competition. Novel research methods – found via pornography coding – suggest that there is a positive relationship between attributes of male ejaculation and time spent performing cunnilingus among pornographic actors (Pham et al. 2016). Therefore, performing cunnilingus before copulation may, in part, produce more sperm which (1) could compete with other sperm in the reproductive tract or (2) produce more sperm to fertilize the ova. Furthermore, performing
Cunnilingus may be a way to taste or smell rival semen (Thornhill 2006). Although there is no empirical work on this, there is evidence that men who are at greater risk of infidelity and sperm competition report spending more time performing cunnilingus (Pham and Shackelford 2013a; Pham et al. 2013).

Engaging in cunnilingus can also be used to manipulate one’s partner. For example, both men and women perform oral sex on their partner as a benefit-provision mate retention behavior (Sela et al. 2015). In addition, men who perform more mate retention behaviors and more benefit-provision mate retention behaviors report a greater interest in performing cunnilingus on their partner (Pham and Shackelford 2013b) which can alter their partner’s behavior and can influence their relationship satisfaction (Frederick et al. 2017).

**Conclusion**

Cunnilingus can be a tool to facilitate satisfaction within the relationship and can be a tool to combat sperm competition and retain one’s partner. Future research should examine how women manipulate men into performing cunnilingus and how engaging in cunnilingus similarly benefits non-heterosexual couples (e.g., used as a mate retention tool).

**Cross-References**

- Oral Sex
- Oral Sex as Mate Retention

**References**


