

Counselor Reference for Anal Sex Counseling

Participants may feel unable or uncomfortable disclosing anal sex behaviour, especially as it is generally a stigmatised and taboo behaviour. When counselling about anal sex, remember that anal sex is a normal sexual behaviour that might be part of any healthy sexual relationship, like vaginal sex, oral sex, kissing etc. **It is important to be non-judgmental and remember that our job is to provide people with information about how to practice sex safely - and that includes anal sex.**

Acknowledging that anal sex may be a difficult thing to talk about can be a good way to open the conversation. Try something like:

“In our previous counseling sessions, we’ve talked a lot about your risk of HIV acquisition through vaginal sex, but we have never discussed anal sex. I know that this can be a sensitive topic, but many couples have and enjoy anal sex and we want to make sure all our participants know how to protect themselves from HIV if they engage in anal sex. Can you share with me any knowledge or experience you have with anal sex?”

Below are some facts about anal sex that may help you as you counsel participants on this topic.

What is anal sex?

Anal sex is when a man puts his penis into his partner’s anus or rectum. This is not the same as when the penis is inserted into the vagina “from behind” or “from the back”.

- Commonly used slang to describe vaginal sex from behind or anal sex is “doggy style.” If a participant uses this term, be sure to clarify its meaning.

Who has anal sex?

Both men and women have anal sex. Myths that only homosexual couples or commercial sex workers have anal sex are not true.

Why might people have anal sex? There are lots of reasons why people engage in anal sex:

- curiosity
- pleasure
- boredom
- faster ejaculation
- tighter sensation
- in the presence of vaginal STIs
- to please a partner
- male partner has a small penis
- money
- during pregnancy or menstruation
- as a form of contraception
- to increase intimacy

Beliefs, myths, and misconceptions about anal sex:

- Misconception that anal sex is safer than vaginal sex
- Belief that 'virginity' is preserved as long as vaginal sex is avoided
- Belief that anal sex is an 'abstinent' behavior
- Belief that the anus does not have the same infections as the vagina
- Myth that condoms are not necessary for anal sex

Like vaginal sex, anal sex may be consensual or non-consensual. Understanding the reasons why someone has anal sex can help you determine this. If you have reason to believe anal sex is non-consensual, additional supportive counseling or referrals to local organizations that help victims of intimate partner violence may be necessary.

HIV transmission and anal sex

Unprotected anal sex puts people at higher risk for acquiring HIV than any other sexual behavior. Unprotected anal sex is riskier for women than unprotected vaginal sex because tissue in the rectum is very delicate and lacks natural lubrication. Rectal tissue is easily damaged during un-lubricated anal sex, providing an easy point of entry into the body for the HIV virus.

How to increase protection against HIV during anal sex:

- Use condoms
- Use water-based lubricants (Counselors should provide examples of water-based lubricants available locally and/or give some to the participant). Note that even though water-based lubricants should not be used vaginally in ASPIRE, they are ok to use during anal sex.
- **AVOID** oil-based lubricants (like Vaseline or body lotion), which will damage condoms.
- Reduce the number of sexual partners.
- Replace anal sex with less risky sexual behaviors, such as vaginal sex, oral sex, kissing, etc.
- Never insert the vaginal ring rectally.

Why is it important to talk about anal sex in ASPIRE?

- Study staff ask for open reporting of anal sex to make sure that participants have the information they need to protect themselves.
- Knowing about anal sex behaviors will help the research team understand if the infection could have been transmitted due to sexual practices that are not protected by vaginal ring use.