

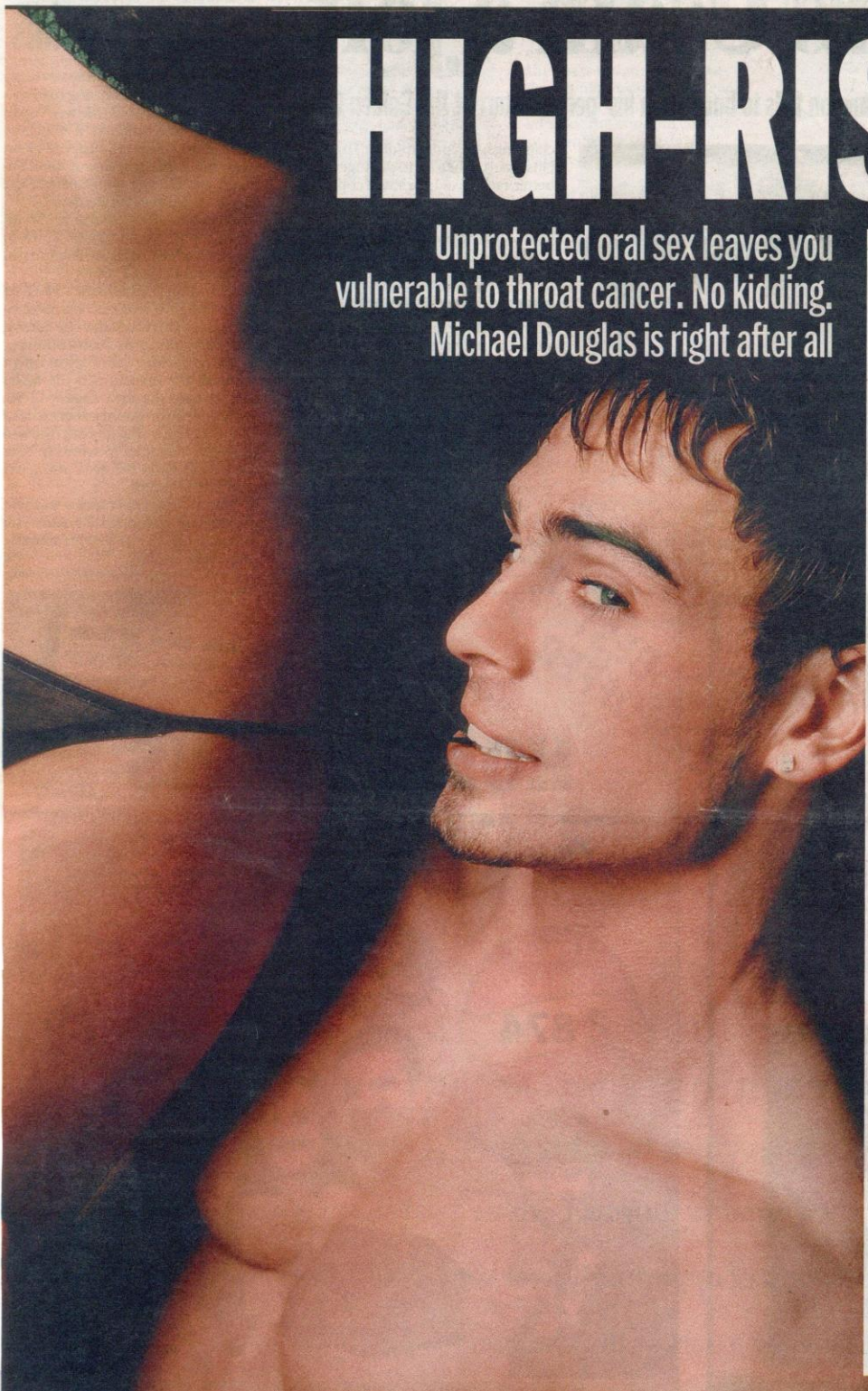


HEALTH TIPS

An ounce of dark chocolate daily lowers blood pressure and improves 'good' cholesterol levels



Even the anticipation of laughter seems to reduce stress



HIGH-RISK LOVE

Unprotected oral sex leaves you vulnerable to throat cancer. No kidding. Michael Douglas is right after all

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Oral sex seems to have suddenly lost its sheen after Hollywood actor Michael Douglas claimed (and then denied) that it's his fondness for performing oral sex on women that triggered his throat cancer. Earlier, the 68-year-old star had blamed smoking and drinking for it. This week, he pinned responsibility on the Human Papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted virus, for the disease he has been battling since 2010.

Globally, figures are alarming. The American Cancer Society and Centres for Disease Control (CDC) claims that 72 per cent of all oral tumours in the US are caused by HPV. Further, it has surpassed tobacco and alcohol to become the leading cause of head and neck cancer among men.

Although some sex educators say it's tough to determine just how risky oral sex is — since people who tend to indulge in it also practice other kinds of sex (penetrative vaginal or anal) which may put them at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), the fear isn't altogether misplaced. Dr Vedang Murthy, associate professor and consultant radiation oncologist at Tata Memorial Hospital, says, "The co-relation between oral sex and mouth and throat cancer has grown prominent, of late. There is good evidence to suggest that multiple sexual partners and oral sex can increase the chance of contracting a specific type of HPV."

Dr Rajiv Sarin, director at The Advanced Centre for Treatment, Research and Education in Cancer, the R&D arm of Tata Memorial, suggests that the cancer could take between 10 to 30 years to surface after the initial infection. "Which is why there is usually a long time lag between changes

in sexual practices of a generation and their cancer manifestations," he says.

Dr Murthy, who says they are in the midst of conducting studies that will ascertain the prevalence of HPV-related cancers in the country, adds that India is at a disadvantage. "With an overwhelming tobacco burden, the relevance of HPV in India is still uncertain," he says. Add to it a lack of privacy in busy hospitals, inadequate training of Indian doctors in recording sexual habits of patients, and socio-cultural sensitivity, and you have the tough task of establishing sexual practice patterns of Indians.

WE ARE AT A DISADVANTAGE

The Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society (MSACS) says the total number of new reported cases of STIs in the state including Mumbai, has risen by 5,328 in just the last one year. It is up from 1,34,395 in 2011 (men: 58,022; women: 76,190) to 1,39,753 in 2012 (men: 50,831; women: 88,665). These are of course, government hospital figures and don't include those from private clinics.

With relationships growing liberal, Indians, says consultant psychiatrist and sexologist Dr Madhav Pakhare, are growing used to more than one type of sexual act. "Vaginal sex is still most common. Oral and anal are add-on, adjuvant sexual acts," he says. And any of these practices, considering all of them involve a transfer of body fluids between partners, can leave lovers susceptible to infections that can range from gon-

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DR RAJIV SARIN,
DIRECTOR, ACTREC



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orrhoea, syphilis and chlamydia to hepatitis A, B, C, genital warts, herpes simplex virus (HSV) and HIV.

NO SIGNS

The good news is that you are at a risk of infection only if your partner is carrying an STI. The bummer: most don't know if they are. Typically, STIs don't carry symptoms, and those that do are so mild, you may not even notice. It could be as innocuous as a slight discharge from the vagina or penis, or a burning sensation when urinating. The herpes simple virus 2 leads to tiny genital blisters that are often overlooked.

Urine and blood tests and vaginal swabs are the only way to find out if someone is carrying an infection.

Dr Sarin puts the debate into perspective when he says, "Safety is a relative term." Most sex educators will tell you there is no such thing as 100 per cent safe sex. What you can do, though, is make prudent choices, eliminate the smaller risks and avoid infected and multiple partners.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY & THEIR RISKS

Oral sex

It refers to the stimulation of the genitalia of a sex partner with the use of the mouth or tongue, and poses a risk of infection to both, the one performing and receiving it. The

WARNING SIGNALS

HPV: Genital warts

Chlamydia: Burning sensation when urinating, discharge from penis, vagina or rectum, testicular tenderness, pain during sex

HSV2: Blisters on body in some cases, fever, fatigue

Gonorrhoea: Burning sensation when urinating, coloured discharge from penis, swollen testicles, increased vaginal discharge, bleeding between period

risk of transmission is higher, say doctors, if either partner has a sore or cut around the mouth or genitals. Viruses present in the semen, vaginal fluid or blood can travel far more easily into a partner's body through breaks in the skin. To heighten safety, you can use a condom (which is why they make flavoured ones) that will act as a barrier.

Peno-vaginal sex

This is the most common sexual act and refers to when a man's penis enters his partner's vagina. Infections, warn doctors, can be passed on even if the penis isn't fully inserted or the man doesn't ejaculate. This is because infections can be present in pre-ejaculate fluid or what's commonly called pre-

come. Shallow insertion, called dipping, carries as much risk. Using a condom is a solution only if they are used each and every time, and accurately. If the sex is rough, or the condom is old, it can slip or tear. Protection against STIs is limited since the condom shields the penis; the scrotum is exposed.

Use of sex toys

The term covers a series of products including vibrators and inflatable dolls. Conservative estimates peg the adult products market, of which sex toys are a part, in the country at more than Rs 500 crore. Any object used in the act of sex, whether it's designed for this use or not, can cause infection. It's important to keep sex toys clean. If you are sharing them, make sure that you wash them between users, and slip a new condom on them before use. Sex toys may contain toxins-phthalates, says Dr Pakhare. Studies on rodents have revealed that when exposed to these in large doses, phthalates can cause damage to the liver, lungs, kidneys, testes and result in hormonal disruption.

Fingering

It refers to using and inserting the finger into a partner's genitalia, and risk of STI is lowest in this method unless there are cuts or sores on the fingers.

THE 2-MINUTEREAD

SMALL LIFESTYLE CHANGES COULD REDUCE STROKE RISK



A new study has revealed that making small lifestyle changes could reduce your risk of having a stroke.

Researchers assessed stroke risk using the American Heart Association's Life's Simple 7 health factors: be active, control cholesterol, eat a healthy diet, manage blood pressure, maintain a healthy weight, control blood sugar and don't smoke.

"We used the assessment tool to look at stroke risk and found that small differences in health status were associated with large reductions in stroke risk," Mary Cushman, M.D., M.Sc., senior author and professor of medicine at the University of Vermont in Burlington said.

Researchers divided the Life's Simple 7 scores into three categories: zero to four points for inadequate, five to nine points for average, and 10 to 14 points for optimum cardiovascular health.

Researchers found that every one-point increase toward a better score was associated with an eight per cent lower stroke risk.

Compared to those with inadequate scores, people with optimum scores had a 48 per cent lower stroke risk and those with average scores had a 27 per cent lower stroke risk.

The study is published in the American Heart Association journal *Stroke*.

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