

Anal Play—Without Pain

By Michael Castleman

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Anal Play—Without Pain

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A Minority Experience

Anal play, particularly anal intercourse, is much more popular in porn than it is in the lives of real lovers. No matter how you define it, anal play appeals to only a minority of American lovers. In the landmark 1999 University of Chicago “Sex in America” survey, 26 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women said they’d tried it—but only a small fraction said they’d included anal play the last time they had sex before being surveyed—2 percent of the men, 1 percent of the women. In a similar survey by University of California researchers, 7 percent of respondents said they’d experienced anal play during the previous 12 months.

“Anal sex is certainly not mainstream,” says Michigan sex therapist Dennis Sugrue, Ph.D., “but increasingly, it’s on the list of sexual experiences Americans are curious about. For most, it’s a novelty, forbidden fruit. Those who enjoy it often say it deepens intimacy in a special way. It’s a way for the recipient to say: No part of me is out of bounds to you, and a way for the inserter to say: No part of you turns me off. All of you turns me on.”

Beyond the Pain and Misconceptions

Unfortunately, many women have had bad experiences being on the receiving end of anal sex, particularly penis-anus intercourse. The anus is much less receptive than the vagina or mouth, so many men have had difficulty entering it—and when they do, many women experience sharp pain, which typically ends things, often permanently.

Misconceptions also abound about anal play, for example, that it’s dirty, that it *must* hurt women, that men who enjoy receiving it must be gay, and that it spreads HIV. However:

- With some forethought and care, anal sex need not be painful.
- With careful hygiene, it’s clean, and free from fecal contact.
- Many men who are 100 percent heterosexual experience intense pleasure from receptive anal play.
- And while receptive anal intercourse is the most efficient sexual route for transmission of HIV, the reason is *not* anal sex per se, but rather the fact that anal intercourse is more likely than oral or vaginal intercourse to allow semen-blood contact. Anal intercourse with condoms is just as HIV-safe as any other type of safe sex.

Anal Anatomy Surprises

The anus is more complicated than most people think. Morin explains: “One crucial fact is that the human body has two rings of anal sphincter muscles, the external one that’s visible and another ring slightly inside. The external sphincter is pretty easy to relax, but the internal one is less so. Different parts of the nervous system control each of these two sphincters, so relaxing the external opening doesn’t necessarily relax the internal one. Many people store up stress in their internal anal sphincter muscles, just as some people store stress in their backs or necks. As a result some have a harder time than others learning to relax the internal sphincter, and enjoy comfortable anal play. But if you want to, over time, you probably can.”

Moving internally from the anal sphincters, the narrow, muscular anal canal extends an inch or two. The sphincters and anal canal are richly supplied with nerves and are highly sensitive to touch, which is why many people find anal touch erotic. In addition, the anus is surrounded by the pelvic floor muscles, notably the pubococcygeus (PC) muscle, a key muscle that contracts during orgasm. Anal stimulation can excite the PC and intensify orgasm.

The anal canal widens to become the rectum, a five-inch tube of soft tissue. The rectum is not a straight cylinder. It has curves that vary from person to person. Anything inserted into the rectum must negotiate these curves, one reason why insertion of anything into the anus should proceed very slowly, with lots of lubrication, and with *the recipient always in control of the speed and depth of insertion*.

There are usually only traces of stool in the rectum and anal canal. Most fecal material is stored just above the rectum in the descending colon. When you feel “the urge,” stool moves into the rectum and fairly quickly passes out of the body. Most of the time, when you feel no urge to defecate, there are only small amounts of stool in the rectum. However there may be enough to leave traces on anything that enters the anus.

Finally, unlike the vagina, the anus and rectum are *not* self-lubricating. To enjoy anal sex, *you must use plenty of lubricant*—the more the better. Even with liberal lubrication, anal insertion of anything or its vigorous movement may abrade the soft tissue of the anal canal and rectum, and cause minor bleeding, especially if the recipient is among the estimated one-third of the U.S. population with hemorrhoids.

Minor bleeding of the anal canal is no cause for concern—unless the object inserted is an erection, and the inserter is infected with HIV. If HIV-contaminated semen

comes in contact with blood, the receiving partner is at considerable risk of becoming infected. Unless you're confident that your lover is HIV-negative and free of other sexually transmitted infections, all sex should be safe sex with condoms. Safe sex is especially important during anal play because it's more likely than other sexual activities to result in semen-blood contact.

Hygiene Issues

“Our culture views the anus as dirty and disgusting,” Morin explains. “It’s an area considered taboo. On an intellectual level, plenty of people might like to explore anal pleasure, but they have a hard time because emotionally, they can’t handle it. The anal taboo can be overcome, but it takes time. Take all the time you need. Otherwise, anal sex is no fun, or even worse, it becomes coercive.”

In anal play, cleanliness is crucial. Wash, bathe, or shower beforehand. Clean the area with a soapy finger. Some people also rinse the rectum and anal canal with an enema. Disposable enemas (Fleet) are available over the counter at pharmacies. If you're new to enemas, take your time. The first few may feel odd. Use the prepared solution, or fill the plastic bottle with warm water. Lubricate your anus and anal canal, bend over—or drop down to your elbows and knees—then insert the flexible nozzle, gently squeeze the bottle, wait a minute or two, and then expel the water into the toilet. Anal rinsing not only cleans the area, but also helps both lovers relax and feel less apprehensive about anal play. If the receiving anus and anal canal have been washed well beforehand, then anal play—including oral-anal contact (rimming)—is as clean as any other form of lovemaking. But *nothing* that has had contact with the anal area should be introduced into the vagina. Anal bacteria may cause a urinary tract infection.

Recipients Should Start Solo

If you're new to anal play (and even for most people who are experienced), forget penis-anus intercourse. It's often difficult for the inserter and painful for the recipient. Most women in pornography refuse to do it. Start with well-lubricated anal sphincter massage, without any insertion. If both lovers feel comfortable with that, then consider inserting one finger, and as you become more experienced, perhaps a second finger or well-lubricated butt plug.

If you are interested in being the receiving lover, begin your explorations by fingering yourself. “Lubricate the opening,” advises New York City sex educator Betty Dodson, Ph.D. “Touch around it. Pay attention to the different sensations you feel. Using one finger, slowly press in as you slightly bear down to open your sphincter muscles. See if you can feel both rings of anal sphincter muscles.”

Use *plenty* of lube. Try different brands to see which one(s) you like best. Liquid water-based products may be your lube of choice for other forms of lovemaking, but they may not feel best for anal play. Try the thicker jellies, or experiment with vegetable oil or Crisco. Petroleum-based lubricants may cause vaginal irritation, so they should not be used for vaginal intercourse. But for anal sex, some people enjoy them.

During solo explorations, pay attention to your external and internal sphincters and to the unique curves of your rectum. Practice relaxing your sphincters. Breathe deeply. Try different positions to see which ones feel most comfortable.

Then, move on to experimenting with a well-lubricated butt plug. Start with a small, thin plug, and progress to larger, thicker ones only if you feel inclined. “Butt plugs are specially designed for anal play,” Dodson says. “The flared base keeps them from getting lost in there. They come in a variety of sizes and are designed to stay in place once they are inserted. This leaves your hands free to do other things.” Or try anal beads, designed to serially open and close the anal sphincters, which triggers sensations some people find erotic. The lover on the receiving side of anal play should become as comfortable as possible with solo play before complicating things with anyone else. Anal toys are available through mypleasure.com.

Rule #1: It Should Never Hurt

“If it does,” Morin explains, “the recipient is not sufficiently relaxed, the receiving anus and the object being inserted are not sufficiently lubricated, and/or the inserter is being insensitive and pushy.”

Pain—and fear of pain—are the main reasons why women (and recipient men) nix anal play. “Women’s biggest complaint about anal sex is that men push in too quickly,” Dodson explains. “That can really hurt. I had my earliest experience with anal intercourse in my twenties. It was a disaster. We were both young and inexperienced. We didn’t even know enough to use lubrication. And I was far from relaxed. He pushed in and I felt this a hot, burning sensation. I cried out in pain, but my boyfriend mistook my cries of pain for passion and pushed in deeper. I yanked away from him, furious. It took me 20 years to try anal again.”

“Penis-anus intercourse is too much for most couples,” Sugrue says. “The typical erection is too large for women to receive comfortably. It’s intimidating. Most people prefer anal fingering. I encourage couples to just touch and massage each others’ anuses. That can feel incredibly erotic for both the massager and the recipient.”

“Some men enjoy being deeply fingered,” says Fair Oaks, California sex therapist Louanne Weston, Ph.D., “because it massages the prostate gland, which can be a source of unique pleasure.”

Whole-Body Relaxation Is Key

Couples interested in anal play should approach it slowly. First, focus on whole-body relaxation. Take a hot bath or shower together. While bathing, wash the anal area with soap and water, and wash inside the anus as well. Next enjoy some whole-body massage, and other sex play. Anal usually feels most enjoyable when both lovers are highly aroused. Then proceed to light, well-lubricated massage of the external anal sphincter. If the recipient says that feels okay, then try very gentle, shallow fingering. Most people go no further than this.

If you're interested in penis-in-anus intercourse—or in the man being the recipient with the woman using a strap-on dildo—the recipient should *ALWAYS* be the one in control, the one who does the moving. The inserter should remain still—no pushing into the anus, and no thrusting in the anal canal until the recipient invites it, and if so, slow, gentle movements. The recipient should move back onto the inserting penis or toy. This allows the recipient to control the speed and depth of insertion, and stay relaxed and comfortable. Good positions include: recipient-on-top, back-to-chest spooning, or with the recipient standing and bent at the waist and the inserter behind.

The Recipient Should Always Control Anal Play

How deep can you go? Comfortable depth varies greatly from person to person. After a while, some recipients can accommodate much of the penis. But unlike what you see in pornography, most cannot. Many feel uncomfortable accepting anything but the head of the penis, if that. Some recipients feel more receptive if they wear a butt plug for about 30 minutes before attempting to accommodate an erection or other sex toy. Don't rush things. Deep insertion often takes months, and most recipients *never* feel comfortable with it. *This bears repeating: Most lovers who enjoy anal play limit themselves to fingering.*

Anal play can lead to particularly intense orgasms. Some recipients love having a finger or plug inserted as their lover brings them to orgasm by hand, mouth, or vibrator. But many recipients prefer not to have orgasms during anal play, and especially not with a penis inside them. The reason is that orgasm causes involuntary muscle contractions and thrusting movements that may be painful for the recipient. But many inserters love orgasm during anal intercourse because the tight,

muscular anal canal clamps down on erections quite firmly. Discuss this. It should be the recipient's call.

If One Lover Wants to Try It and the Other Doesn't

Frequently one lover is eager to explore anal play, but the other is reluctant or opposed. Morin advises the eager lover: "Never force it. And don't nag. In a calm, loving manner, explore your partner's reluctance. What exactly puts off your lover? Listen carefully, and try to address the person's concerns. Ask if there is *any* way your partner might feel comfortable exploring anal play. Remember, the majority of people limit it to sphincter massage and gentle fingering. Do *only* what's mutually agreed. If your partner says stop, stop immediately. Respect your lover's limits."

Morin also has some advice for those reluctant to try anal play: "You're under no obligation to do anything you feel uncomfortable doing. Your lover should respect your limits. But don't dismiss anal play out of hand. There's nothing wrong, unnatural, weird, kinky, or perverted about it. Think about why you're reluctant, and honestly tell your partner. Do your feelings have to do with the anal taboo? Memories of previous anal experiences that hurt? By discussing your issues, the two of you learn more about one another, and that knowledge can enhance intimacy even if you *don't* have anal sex. Is there *any* type of anal play you might be willing to try? If so, declare it along with your limits. If you're willing to be on the receiving side of any anal play, experiment solo until you feel comfortable inviting your lover to join you."

After anal fingering or intercourse, the recipient may feel the urge to defecate. It may be a real urge. But it may be a false alarm, the reaction of a rectum not yet used to anal sex.

Many people worry that anal sphincters stretched during anal sex may never return to normal, resulting in soiled underwear. This is highly unlikely. Your anal sphincters have opened and closed during defecation for your entire life. Physiologically, the body can't tell if material is passing out of the anus or into it. Assuming your anal sphincters close normally after defecation, they should do the same after anal play.

If A Man Likes Receiving, Is He Gay?

Finally, many people feel concerned about the "meaning" of anal sex. For example: Does a man's interest in receiving anal pleasure mean that he's gay? Does a man's desire to enter a woman anally mean that he wants to hurt, dominate, or humiliate

her? And if a woman wears a strap-on dildo to enter a man, does that mean she's "too dominant"?

These questions are reasonable because all sex practices exist in cultural contexts. In the U.S., anal sex is most prevalent among gay men, so it's not surprising that some people would link it to homosexuality. But gay men also hold hands, hug, kiss, and enjoy oral sex, and none of them are considered "gay." Sexual orientation is all about the gender you having sex with, and fantasize sex with. It has nothing to do with any specific sexual practices.

In men's prisons, anal sex isn't about pleasure. It's about power. The inserter typically seeks to dominate and humiliate the receiver. This culture of exploitation has, to some extent, carried over to how people view anal play in general. It's certainly possible for men to use anal play as a way to dominate or humiliate women. It's equally possible for women wearing strap-ons to do the same to men. But not necessarily, or even typically. Most anal play is loving.

The fact is, anal play need not mean anything beyond the mutual pleasure and intimacy it provides. No matter what your sexual orientation, anal stimulation can feel erotic and pleasurable because physiologically it stimulates the pelvic floor muscles involved in sexual arousal and orgasm. With mutual consent and limits respected, anal sex has nothing to do with domination, humiliation, degradation, or rape. Many men and women enjoy anal play, and many heterosexual men enjoy receiving everything from fingers to strap-on dildos.

Anal sex requires more communication than most vaginal or oral sex. The extra communication—and the mutual trust required to enjoy anal play—can deepen intimacy and bring couples closer. In the end, as it were, anal play is just another sexual variation, one some people find loving, enjoyable, and sex-enhancing.

Help

For individualized help dealing with anal sex issues, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit aasect.org, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or sstarnet.org, the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

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