

# SexSense<sup>©</sup>

BY DEBORAH CAUST, PH.D.

## FRENCH KISSING

**Q:** How did kissing get started? I know that in other cultures, like among the Eskimos, people don't kiss. When I think about it, kissing (especially tongue kissing) is a really strange, unsanitary thing to do (though I admit I enjoy it with the right person!) What can you tell me about this practice.

**A:** Kissing is a fairly recent development of the Western World. One of the earliest documented instances of kissing as an expression of love is probably from the sixth century when Leybard, a saint of Tours, gave his betrothed a ring, a kiss and a pair of shoes. "The ring to bind them together; the kiss to seal the pledge of affection; the shoes, a sign of his utter subjection to her" (*Strange Customs of Courtship and Marriage*, 1942). How times have changed!

Kissing was unknown in many parts of the world until Western explorers, travelers and missionaries introduced the custom to other cultures. Even today, it is not a preferred form of intimate expression among most peoples in Asia, Africa, Polynesia or among the Eskimos or the aborigines.

Deep kissing (French, or tongue kissing) is particularly rare cross-culturally. According to one researcher, Leonore Tiefer (1978), the practice of deep kissing is unrelated to the degree of sexual openness in a particular culture. In some sexually permissive societies, young people are encouraged to practice sexual activity with a number of partners before selecting a mate, but exclude kissing from their repertoire, regarding the practice as dangerous, unhealthful or disgusting.

According to an advice nurse at Kaiser Hospital, San Rafael, the mouth is the "dirtiest place in the body" containing almost every variety of bacteria. The one exception is *E. coli*, found in the rectum. The mouth can transmit a variety of infections including strep and upper respiratory ailments. Bleeding gums may transmit hepatitis and HIV. If there is a compromised immune system, yeast may be transmitted as well. The advice nurse suggested caution when deep kissing someone new.

Pressing the lips to a partner's makes sense, since the lips are particularly sensitive to erotic stimulation. And, of course, the lips are located near the eyes, the ears and the nose, so that other senses may be intimately involved as well.

Yes, deep kissing is unsanitary, but isn't it a risk well worth taking?