S2E4

[00:00:00] **Ronni:** Welcome to, this is probably a really weird question. The podcast for a medical doctor

[00:00:12] **Rebecca:** and a doctor of history talk about sex history and the not at all weird questions we hear from patients, students, and colleagues about our bodies and our sexualities. I'm Dr. Ronnie Hyon. And I'm Professor Rebecca Davis.

[00:00:28] **Ronni:** And today's question is,

[00:00:31] **Rebecca:** can anyone tell if I'm a virgin?

[00:00:38] **Ronni:** I appreciate you and your rage.

[00:00:41] **Rebecca:** You know what? Not many people have ever said those two things together, so I appreciate that.

Ronnie, do you still have stars in your eyes from being on the live stream with Mercury, Stardust when she and her team raised, not one, not two, but 2.3 million to support trans. Affirming

[00:01:04] **Ronni:** healthcare. It was so amazing. It was so cool to, to even just like be there to witness it. It was especially fun to unexpectedly get to fill in for mercury and jewelry when they needed.

Needed a break. I have gotten some really cute messages from patients that are like, I saw you on TikTok.

[00:01:26] **Rebecca:** My doctor is famous. Oh my God. Not doctor on

[00:01:29] **Ronni:** TikTok. But yeah, it was so fun and I was so proud of them. It was like I. Such a labor of love and so much money to help people who need it and who deserve it.

[00:01:41] **Rebecca:** That's so awesome. Well, congrats to Mercury. We're just indebted to her for coming on to our podcast. Catch that episode if you didn't get it already,

[00:01:49] **Ronni:** and it is not too late to donate to point of pride. If you are looking to make a donation to an organization that is for trans and non-binary folks, bi trans, and non-binary folks, check out.

Point of pride.

[00:02:01] **Rebecca:** Awesome. So I have this strong sort of visceral physical slash emotional response to this month's topic. I was

[00:02:13] **Ronni:** gonna say, you know, you look like a, you look like a coiled serpent. You're like ready to strike at this topic.

[00:02:21] **Rebecca:** And I was reading an article today that had all of these euphemisms for what virginity is, and the more of them I read, the angrier I got.

Yeah. And so listeners, I'm gonna throw out some of these terms. Skip ahead 15 seconds if it makes you anywhere near as nauseous as it makes me. But the maiden head popping the cherry. Yes. I mean, oh god. So the whole concept of virginity is so fucked up that.

[00:02:50] **Ronni:** I, I can barely find the

[00:02:52] **Rebecca:** words to talk about this topic, but I'll

[00:02:55] **Ronni:** Well, I'm so glad that you're so fired up because, you know, I feel like we always start with the medical stuff, so I'm ready to like, start out with some historical groundwork to get us all fired up.

Yes. Well,

[00:03:06] **Rebecca:** it's bananas. So the whole idea of virginity has ancient origins, and it's really almost always about female virginity. And at least that's where the social stakes are. That's why people care. Mm-hmm. And this idea that a female virgin was both sort of spiritually pure, physically pure, you know, worthy of marriage, worthy of being sold by her.

Father to her prospective husband. Um, there were sacred roles in ancient Rome for the Vestal Virgins who if they lost their virginity, were condemned to death. Oh. Or that it's this sort of sacred commitment to God when Christianity comes along, that a female's virginity is a demonstration that she is worthy in the eyes of God.

So this is like a crossover episode to the last one we did about smell. Yeah. Cause there were tests. In the ancient Christian world, sniff tests for virginity. What? And this was a carryover from ancient Greek thinking that the vaginas of virgins were closed. They were webs, knots and blood vessels that were, uh, tightly closed so that if you fumigate a woman, like if you whew, it's like, I don't know, sent some steam up there and then you smelled the girl's breath.

Um, if her breath was stinky, like whatever, you just whew up inside of her. Oh no, it wasn't a closed system anymore

[00:04:35] **Ronni:** and that she was, you know, a lot of medicine is very much about plumbing, but I will say that, that that, uh, conduit. Doesn't hold up.

[00:04:47] **Rebecca:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. There was a 13th century Scottish mathematician and theologian who thought that he could, with the like, play around with the nasal cartilage and sense from the way it responded, I guess, to his touch, whether or not the woman was a virgin.

Ugh. And there were even in the 20th century Christian clergy who believed that they could smell. Virginity, remember from last month's episode that um, the witches, witches are stanky? Yes. So virgins are sweet smelling according to this nonsense. According to this.

[00:05:23] **Ronni:** There's a lot to unpack there. Deep

[00:05:25] **Rebecca:** nonsense.

So, listeners, I can't stand still while I talk about this. I'm like, I'm like writhing. I stand up when I am at my computer, but I'm like physically, Uncomfortable talking about all of this, and so hopefully fellow physicians, uh,

[00:05:40] **Ronni:** it looks like Dr. Davis has akathisia. You know what I mean? Yeah. I don't know

[00:05:44] **Rebecca:** what that means.

I'm gonna assume that it, that it something bad means you are like crawling out of your skin. Yes. Yes. There. I didn't know that had a medical term. That is exactly how I feel. So basically, What gets me completely out of my mind about the whole concept of virginity is not only the quite evident historical.

Sexism, patriarchy embedded in the very idea that a woman's worth is dependent upon whether or not she's had penis, vagina, sexual intercourse. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. That this, that a woman who's had it before marriage is ruined. So-called spoiled. Yeah. Spoiled. Oh God. Yeah. But I hate that language, but also that it's a complete defining of what sex is, according to two things, whether or not the person with the penis is enjoying it.

Oh, and whether or not the woman involved is a married person who's going to get pregnant outside of those two things, virginity has no meaning.

[00:06:47] **Ronni:** Yeah, it's socially constructed, right?

[00:06:49] **Rebecca:** Oh, it's completely split it, but it's socially constructed in a world in which the only two things about sex that matter are whether the person with the penis is having a good time.

Or whether this is a married woman who is possibly going to become pregnant with that penis person's child. So, cause it's like, why else does it matter? Right. It doesn't make any sense. And there's, even in the early 20th century, there was this past breaking gynecologist, obstetrician who they would do sort of a episiotomy repair starting in the

[00:07:23] **Ronni:** 1920s.

Oh, don't go there. I'm just gonna

[00:07:25] **Rebecca:** say real quick, ugh. It was to restore quote unquote virginal conditions. Yeah. And again, so that's virginity, socially constructed, defined as is the vagina. Tight, right? Mm-hmm. Is it a smaller opening and therefore presumably more pleasurable for the person with the penis that tightening up of the vagina would do nothing to change the pleasure of the person with the vagina?

Right. And then how people are now so normatively socialized to think that virginity is actually a thing that exists, A thing that can be lost, a thing that can be protected, a thing that can be valued. What we're valuing. What we're protecting, what we're saving or giving away is sexism. Mm-hmm.

[00:08:16] **Ronni:** Okay. I'm done.

You know, it's funny because like in some ways I don't even think about like pleasure as entering into the virginity equation at all. Like for anybody, like in some ways it seems very like proprietary, you know? It's like, Whether or not somebody is a virgin makes them either a valued good or damaged goods right, and that, that somebody has the right to own that condition.

I never even think about pleasure. It just seems like a, I don't even know what to, what to say about it. It's just as like, I hadn't even really thought about it as. Something that is historically constructed as opposed to socially constructed. Well, the

[00:09:02] **Rebecca:** reason I bring in pleasure is because there are at the same time ongoing.

References in ancient medicine and early Christianity in all kinds of social history to male expressions of lust. I mean, they're also female expressions of lust, but they're usually denigrated of, you know, desire of sort of the pleasures of sexual intimacy. But women more often enter into the conversation about sex in terms of are they or aren't they virginal at marriage?

Mm-hmm. And it puts such a limiting view on what a person's sexuality entails and, and what it means. So I get agitated.

[00:09:50] **Ronni:** Man. Uh, yeah, it's a lot to take in. It's so complicated. Like so much of the stuff we talk about, there is so much meaning that is constructed out of like thin air, right? It's just, we all are just making it up based on like apparently some god-fearing mathematician from. From long ago.

[00:10:13] **Rebecca:** So I had a funny conversation with my older kid about this recently because he had been at the Y with a buddy of his, and he said, you know, his friend had joked that there.

ID cards to get into the Y, were there V cards and I had never heard that expression. So I said, okay, what's a V card? And so he very kindly and patiently as you would to a slower, elderly, simpler per elderly person. Mm-hmm. Explained to me that a V card was your virginity card. And I said, oh, but being the parent that I am, I was like, so what do you think that means?

Mm-hmm. And of course cuz he is, you know, 13, you know, had some ideas about what he thought it meant. But it really launched us into a conversation about like, well, what if you've two people who are the same sex? Or what does that even mean if you're talking about a non-binary partner? Mm-hmm. And so it got us into this interesting conversation of, you know, the kind of conversations you start having with your kids.

Hopefully. Uh, when they're adolescents about different kinds of experiences and which ones are more serious than others that you might wanna, how do you feel about it? What, what does it mean to feel ready or not feel ready, but that this was a big one, that there's somehow, that this was like a line that you had crossed somehow.

But I also think that, you know, what comes up for me in thinking about this question, if you have patients who ask you this, You know, can anyone tell if I'm a virgin? Is, what do they mean when they ask that question? Like aside from this very patriarchal, historically embedded idea of virginity as a initiation of a, of a female person into sexual intercourse, what does it even mean?

[00:11:51] **Ronni:** Yeah. Well, I mean, I think you got to the heart of it is that it can mean all sorts of different things. And because I see all sorts of people with all sorts of like, Different body parts who are using their body parts in lots of different ways. There's really, I mean, I usually say people well do, do you think you're still a virgin?

And is it important to you? And you know, a lot of times, People will have lots of different reasons for asking, right? Similar to a lot of the questions that I get, there's always something kind of behind the question. So sometimes people have heard from someone else, right? Like, uh, somebody told me that when you go to have your first pap smear, your doctor's gonna know cause they'll be able to see whether or not you're a virgin.

Sometimes folks want to be close or physical with a partner. And they have ideas about like what's okay and what's not okay, either because of how they were raised or what their religion tells them. And they're kind of trying to figure out where the boundaries are that they are, are comfortable with, and I think that's a very appropriate thing to start figuring out.

But I don't know that we need to label it as virginity. Sometimes people are getting married and so they're worried or concerned that. If either they have had a sexual partner in the past that their soon-to-be spouse will know based on the sexual experience that they have or looking at their bodies.

And sometimes people wanna be sure that they can prove that they have not had sex before and that they're a virgin. You know, they're in the not so distant past, uh, there were still physicians that were offering premarital exams that. We're meant to confirm or deny that somebody is a virgin, and if it seems like their vaginal canal or the vaginal opening is very small and like receptive vaginal intercourse might be painful.

Sometimes they'll send these people home with some dilators to try to like stretch the vaginal opening. Spoiler alert, we cannot tell if somebody has had. Sex before or vaginal sex. Sometimes people have heard about like the hymen and they're like, what is that? Like, is that really a thing? And if I like ride my bike, am I gonna have bleeding?

Or you know, people just like don't know what a hymen is because it's not something that we talk about. And then the other thing is I have not myself had any patients. Talk to me about this, but there definitely are young people who are deciding to on their own or being encouraged by others in their lives to take a virginity pledge.

Right. And usually this involves some sort of exchange of a token, whether that's a ring or something like that. And they are promising. And usually it's like a parent. I think that they're promising that they. Will save themselves until marriage

[00:14:54] **Rebecca:** and God, I think it's also that they're promising God. Oh, they're promising

[00:14:57] **Ronni:** God as well.

Yeah. Okay. Well, yeah, I mean luckily, you know, God is very forgiving is what I hear. So, and you know, I don't know if you, in your research, Rebecca, if you came across this story that happened recently about ti the rapper, ti, so he gave a, an interview recently where he said that he takes his. 18 or 19 year old daughter to the gynecologist every

[00:15:24] **Rebecca:** year.

Yes, yes, yes, yes. No, I saw that. Oh, oh,

[00:15:26] **Ronni:** yes. Oh. To confirm that her hymen is intact. And I mean, there is something No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Unsettling to me about that. Not because, you know, like I think families should, should talk about sex, right? Like, I think that's really healthy, but this is like, I don't know, I, you know, it just feels like.

Such an invasion of privacy and also like, I can't imagine being that physician, you know, like what do you do? I think that the, you know, the World Health Organization and a bunch of other, like really reputable global health organizations have come out really strongly against these like virginity exams because, First of all, we, we can't tell, right?

And so if you give somebody this like certificate of virginity, well that's just false. You've just like falsified that. And second of all, it just kind of reinforces this idea that women's only worth, or, or someone's only worth is through their purity or their ability to pleasure somebody else, or their ability to get pregnant and have babies.

And, and I think a lot of physicians probably feel. Motivated to protect their patients and be like, well, I mean, I believe you and I know that there could be a lot of consequences for you. You know, certainly it's not just ancient history that people have been killed for, you know, not appearing to be virginal.

I mean, there are. Mm-hmm. Lots of reasons why somebody very kindly would want to help their patient out, but then it just kind of like reinforces this whole system. It, it must be a really difficult position to be in. Well,

[00:17:14] **Rebecca:** there's a whole, um, purity culture that is still thriving within certain corners of conservative evangelicalism in the United States, around the world, and.

I'll just say, you know, I think people should only have the sex that they want to have. And so if someone did a place in their life where they've decided, I don't wanna do this, fine. I think the whole framing of it as this, you know, sort of sacred idea of virginity is super problematic, but a lot of what goes into purity culture is a, and one of the reasons that I get so worked up about it is it very much becomes.

Enabling of women's vulnerability. I'll say that more simply. Within purity culture, women are thought to be and sort of cis women are thought to be more inherently. That virginity is easier for them, that the sex is less important to cis women than it is to cis men. And so that if you have a couple who are dating and they do end up having vaginal intercourse, that it's really a failure on the part of the cis female partner for not slowing things down and for getting him work too worked up so that he couldn't possibly have stopped what he was doing.

Mm-hmm. And so that's also like this whole idea of linking whether or not you've had a particular kind of sex with being pure. Is deeply embedded within ideas that link a woman's worth to her willingness to sort of limit her sexual experiences in such a way that make men's sexual experiences better.

Mm-hmm.

[00:18:48] **Ronni:** You know, ironically, I think when we focus on P I V or penis and vagina intercourse as like this, the defining characteristic of virginity. Sometimes people end up doing things that they wouldn't otherwise do, maybe with or without barriers like condoms because there's not a worry of pregnancy prevention, for example.

So like, yep, unprotected anal sex or unprotected oral sex. People may end up making choices otherwise and still considering themselves a virgin, which I think is like, You know, if that's how you get pride and that makes you feel good about yourself, that you have not had this one particular sexual encounter.

I, you know, I think that's great, but I, I feel like what we should really be focusing on instead of preserving your, your maiden head or your purity, or whatever it is you wanna call it. Sorry. You know, I think spending that time. Instead of talking about saving yourself, talking about like what does consent mean?

[00:19:53] **Rebecca:** Right. I totally agree. And to the emphasis on consent, I would add a question about pleasure. Mm-hmm. Asking someone who was invested in this, what do you think of in terms of your own pleasure when you think about sexual intercourse and some people may have no investment. In sexual intercourse being pleasurable, and that's fine, but I think that that's such a crucial piece of this whole broader cultural conversation.

We've necessarily had a major social. Yeah, remember, wait a second. Let's talk about what consent is and what it's not. And over the last several years we've needed to do that. And I also think we need to have a bigger conversation about sexual pleasure and understanding. You know, that people have the opportunity to think about what that would look like for themselves, the relationship between consent and pleasure, between safety and pleasure, um, kink, you know, exploring different kinds of sensual, sexual experiences to think about, or fantasies to even just sort of imagine what that might be like for them.

Mm-hmm. Having, mm-hmm. Things like the clitoris be very much discussed during sex education for young people so that people with e clitoris even know that it is, that that is the source of orgasmic pleasure for them, which has nothing to do with so-called virginity. People are growing up thinking that the fuller or thinner presence of a hymen is what determines whether they are.

Sexually worthy people, marriageable people. Mm-hmm. People that God loves. Mm-hmm. And missing from all of that is what about consent as the framework and pleasure as a framework to think about? Yeah. How are you making choices for yourself about. What you want to do. Yeah. And with whom and under what circumstances.

And if you have questions about it, do you even know where to go? You know, I certainly did not find answers to questions about pleasure in 10th grade sex ed at high school. No. That was not where you would find it. No.

[00:22:11] **Ronni:** And it's, it's weird, right? Cuz I feel like. There's no winning, right? Like there's no winning the virginity battle.

Like either you are loose or fast and you've had like too many partners, or you're inexperienced and a nerd, right? There's just like no in between. Um, and it also makes me think about, I don't know if this happened to you. I mean, we both grew up in Ohio, but like, you know, the, there's a lot of. Variability, I think, in people's childhoods.

But I remember things that we would like talk about as kids that, now looking back on it, we just had no flipping clue. Like we would talk about the different colors of m and ms and like what they meant. Like if you got a green m and m, it meant that you were like gonna go all the way. And like I didn't know what the fuck that meant.

Right. And like I also remember there being a lot of discussion about that, like, It's that little like spot. I'm gonna have a really hard time describe this, even though I am a physician. You know how like if you're standing there with your legs together, sometimes you can see, um, there's like a little bit of clear space, like between right the bottom of the vulva and like the top of the thighs, uhhuh, and like, There was a lot of discussion about like, oh, the girls who, the girls who had space there weren't virgins anymore.

Oh. And that's how you can tell if somebody is a virgin or not, because if you can see that little spot of sunlight between somebody's legs, that was how,

[00:23:47] **Rebecca:** oh, I missed that entirely. Really. I really

[00:23:50] **Ronni:** did. And I, you know, I talked to somebody about it. This was years ago, and they said, oh, that's so interesting because.

Where I grew up, if you had that space there, that meant that you weren't fat, and if you, if your thighs touched when you like put your knees together, then your thighs were too fat.

[00:24:13] **Rebecca:** That was actually the context that I grew up. With the thigh conversation. It was a interesting, it was a body shape

[00:24:19] **Ronni:** conversation, but needless to say, all of this is like hogwash, you know?

Yes. Like it's all garbage. It's all garbage. And like the Hyman, I feel like, gosh, the humble Hyman has been given so much weight. You know, it is a, it is a like, Thin membrane of tissue that if you're born with like a uterus in a vagina, most of you will have something there, right? Like some little thin, like rim of tissue or even like a little tag of tissue there.

And you know, we think that maybe the, the hymen exists because when you are a baby, you're like, Pooping and peeing in your pants. Right? And like maybe you don't want all of that bacteria to have unfettered access to the vaginal opening, right? Yeah. Jen Gunter describes, describes the hymen as like, it's like your baby teeth, right?

Like it's normal to have them when you're tiny, and then like as you get older, you don't have them anymore. Right?

[00:25:24] **Rebecca:** So what that brings to mind to me is there's a new documentary out about Brook Shields. Oh yeah. And focusing a little bit on. The very controversial role she had as a very young child, like 10 or 11 in a Louie mal film where she played a sex worker at a New Orleans brothel.

Oh my God. And there was even, I think, some nudity in it and so on. It was, and she was how old? She's like 10 or 11. Ugh, God. And so she's now reflecting as a 57 year old about all of that. But she has an onscreen kiss with an adult male actor, and. She said that she had never kissed anyone before in that way on the lips.

So he pulled her aside and he said, this doesn't count. Aww. And she said, yeah. She said it was the kindest thing he could have said to her. He says, this isn't your first kiss. You're gonna go off and live your life and you're gonna choose when you have your first kiss. This is just acting. Aw, it doesn't count.

And so I feel like, again, something that the idea of you're either a virgin or you're not, takes away from people is the power to say, no, I get to claim my body. I get to claim my pleasure. Mm-hmm. And I get to say, this is the experience that. Brought me into sort of the life I'm going to have as a person who does have sex of various kinds or hasn't, and it's fine and chooses never to have it again or whatever a person decides to do with their body sexually.

I think that for people who, who've had those choices taken away for them at certain times, I, I hope that sort of letting go of the whole Are you or aren't you? It's one or the other framework that virginity forces upon us. Can allow people to say no. Well, that was out of my control. And then theories are the choices that I'm gonna make about my body for the rest of my life.

Oh,

[00:27:10] **Ronni:** I love that. Yeah. Yeah. It's all constructed anyway. Right? So you get to, you get to construct your own meaning.

[00:27:17] **Rebecca:** Yes. Construct your own meaning. Woo.

[00:27:22] **Ronni:** It's all made up anyway. All made up. So you might as well construct a meaning that you like.

[00:27:29] **Rebecca:** I love it. Well, friend. It's always good to talk with you.

[00:27:32] **Ronni:** It's always good to talk with you too.

I appreciate you and your rage.

[00:27:37] **Rebecca:** You know what? Not many people have ever said those two things together, so I appreciate that.

[00:27:47] **Ronni:** You've been listening to, this is probably a really weird question, which is created, hosted, and produced by Rebecca Davis and Ronnie Hyon.

[00:27:55] **Rebecca:** You can learn more about us. Read our show notes and find links to resources on our website, www really weird question.com. Follow us on Twitter

[00:28:06] **Ronni:** at a really weird pod, Rebecca Tweets at History Davis and Ronnie at Dr.

Awkward md.

[00:28:13] **Rebecca:** Send us your really weird, not really questions by emailing us at really weird question gmail.com.

[00:28:21] **Ronni:** Nora Carlson is our website Guru and social

[00:28:24] **Rebecca:** Manager. Mick Finnegan is our sound engineer. Mark Erbacher

[00:28:29] **Ronni:** composed and recorded our incredible theme music. We

[00:28:32] **Rebecca:** are grateful for the financial support of the Phil's Wickler Charitable and Memorial Foundation Trust.

We additionally thank the foundation for Delaware County. Please

[00:28:42] **Ronni:** rate us and review us on Apple Podcasts to help other people find us in their

[00:28:46] **Rebecca:** feed. Our website is also where you can find links to our fabulous merch. Which helps support the show.

[00:28:52] **Ronni:** Thank you for listening and keep on asking those questions.