

# Piercing and your oral health

Fashion fad or not, many of today's youth are choosing lip, cheek, chin or tongue piercings to make a very personal statement. Individuals who choose to make this fashion statement may end up looking to their dental care professional or physician for help at some point down the road.



## Knowing the risks

Oral piercing can cause pain, swelling, infection, drooling, taste loss, scarring, chipped teeth and tooth loss. Most dentists discourage oral piercing due to the many risks involved. If you decide to get an oral piercing, it is important to understand the associated problems you may experience.

**Infections:** In addition to the many bacteria found in the mouth, there may be an increased amount of bacteria around the puncture area, as well as an introduction to more bacteria when handling the jewelry. This proliferation of bacteria increases the risk of infection.

**Nerve damage/bleeding:** Numbness at the piercing site can occur if damage has been caused to the nerve. Punctured blood vessels could lead to prolonged bleeding. A pierced tongue may swell significantly – severely enough to close off the airway, making it difficult to breathe.

**Damaged teeth and receding gums:** When jewelry pieces – such as long barbells in the tongue or posts/clasps in the lip, cheek, or chin – come into contact with the teeth or gum line, there is risk of irritation and damage. Over a long period of time, chipping, enamel damage or receding gums may occur.

**Difficulty with oral function:** The jewelry in a pierced tongue can stimulate the production of saliva. This excess saliva may cause problems with speech, chewing or swallowing.

**Choking hazard:** If a stud, barbell or ring becomes loose in the mouth, it could present a choking hazard.

## Preventing infection

Despite the risks, and after doing the research, if you choose to go through with an oral piercing, be sure to discuss and follow the home-care tips provided to you by your dentist and piercing specialist. This may help stave off infection. In the weeks after piercing, be sure to avoid alcohol, tobacco products and hard or sticky foods as these can easily cause irritation to the piercing site. In addition, be sure to take good care of your piercing at home:

- Use an antiseptic mouthwash after every meal and brush the jewelry the same as you would your teeth.
- After your tongue has healed, take the piercing out every night and brush it to remove any unseen plaque.
- Consider removing the piercing before eating, sleeping or strenuous activity.

## Sources:

1. American Dental Association (ADA)  
Oral Health Topics A-Z: Oral Piercing  
[www.ada.org/public/topics/piercing\\_faq.asp](http://www.ada.org/public/topics/piercing_faq.asp).
2. Academy of General Dentistry (AGD)  
Fact Sheet: Oral Piercing  
[www.agd.org/public/OralHealthFacts/files/pdfgenerator.aspx?pdf=FS\\_oralpiercing.pdf&id=&margin=4](http://www.agd.org/public/OralHealthFacts/files/pdfgenerator.aspx?pdf=FS_oralpiercing.pdf&id=&margin=4).
3. WebMD  
Dental Health: Oral Piercing  
[www.webmd.com/oral-health/guide/oral-piercing](http://www.webmd.com/oral-health/guide/oral-piercing).

Finally, keep in mind that regulations on piercing vary from state to state, so it is important to be careful and find a professional who is prepared to answer any and all questions.

Prior to getting pierced, visit the piercing studio to make sure all needles and instruments are either disposable or sterilized in a hospital-grade autoclave, and that all jewelry is kept in sterilized packaging. They should use a fresh needle every time, and sterilize all needles and instruments in an autoclave, which uses extreme heat to sanitize the instruments, to avoid serious infections such as HIV or hepatitis. Also, make sure that they use the right kind of metal, such as surgical-grade stainless steel. Some people have allergic reactions to certain metals, which can lead to further complications.

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