



Oral Piercing and Dental Health

Piercing has been a custom of many civilizations for thousands of years. Body piercing with jewelry is considered body art. Oral piercing sites include the tongue, the uvula (the tissue hanging at the back of the mouth), the lower and upper lips, the cheeks, or a combination of these sites. Although oral piercing is becoming more popular, individuals interested in this trend should be aware that it is not without health risks.



Procedure-related risks

Infection

Infection is a possibility with any opening in skin or oral tissues. The mouth is teeming with bacteria and, therefore, carries a high risk for infection at the site of the piercing.

Prolonged bleeding

Damage to the tongue's blood vessels can cause serious blood loss.

Swelling and possible nerve damage

Swelling is a common symptom experienced after oral piercing. Unlike an earlobe that is pierced, the tongue is in constant motion, which can slow and complicate the healing process. Nerve injury to the tongue can result in permanent loss of taste, sensation and/or tongue mobility. An infected tongue can swell and block the airway which may lead to death. Blood clots formed at the wound site may break away and flow through the bloodstream. If a clot lodges in the brain, it may cause a stroke. Due to the risk of infection, Canadian Blood Services refuses donors for six months if they recently received a body piercing or tattoo.

Blood-borne disease transmission

Oral piercing has been identified as a possible factor in the transmission of hepatitis B, C, D and G.

Endocarditis

Oral piercing has a risk of causing endocarditis, a serious inflammation of the heart valves or tissues. The wound created during oral piercing provides an opportunity for oral bacteria to enter the bloodstream, where they can travel to the heart.

Jewelry-related complications

Injury to the gums

Metal jewelry can injure your gums. If the jewelry is placed so that it makes constant contact with your gums, it can cause them to recede.

Damage to your teeth

Contact with the jewelry can chip or crack your teeth.

Interference with normal oral function

Oral jewelry can stimulate excessive saliva production, can affect the ability to pronounce words clearly and may cause problems with chewing and swallowing food. Metal alloys used in the manufacture of oral jewelry can potentially sensitize susceptible people, resulting in allergic contact dermatitis.

Interference with oral health evaluation

Jewelry in the mouth can interfere with taking dental x-rays.

Clear x-rays are essential to a complete oral health evaluation. Jewelry can prevent a radiograph from showing abnormalities like cysts, abscesses or tumours.

Aspiration

There is always a possibility that the jewelry can come loose and may become a choking hazard. The jewelry could also be ingested, which could result in injury to the digestive tract.

Oral hygiene

Jewelry inside the mouth can cause oral hygiene problems. When oral hygiene is poor, the number of germs present in the mouth will increase. They may cause infections. If you wear oral jewelry it is important to:

- Use an antiseptic mouthwash after each meal.
- Brush your jewelry at the same time you brush your teeth.
- Avoid hard and sticky foods.
- Have regular dental checkups.

Questions to ask before getting a piercing

- What experience does the operator have?
- Is the business inspected and approved by the Health Unit?
- Does the operator follow infection-control guidelines?
- Is a sterile needle used for each piercing?
- Does the operator sterilize the instruments in an autoclave?
- Is a spore testing done to ensure that the autoclave is sterilizing properly?
- What steps does the operator take to protect himself/herself and you from blood-borne diseases, e.g., washing hands, wearing new gloves for each client, cleaning counters etc.?
- Does the operator explain the procedure, ask for written consent and provide aftercare instructions?

It is important to have full knowledge of potential complications and to continually monitor for possible infection.

Adapted from the Saskatoon Health Region

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