



Your Oral Health

Dental Health Information Series



Oral Piercing

It's important to know the facts about tongue and lip piercings so that you can make informed decisions.

Tongue Piercing

In the best case scenario, soreness and swelling will be the only symptoms experienced following the piercing procedure, however in some cases, damaged teeth, excessive bleeding and infection can occur.

Tongue piercing involves a needle being inserted through the midline of the tongue to place a stud, hoop or a barbell in the tongue, and is usually done without anaesthetic. After piercing, common symptoms include swelling and pain.

Possible Side Effects

- Slight bleeding can be expected. There is a risk that blood vessels can be severed in the process of piercing the tongue, which can cause excessive bleeding.
- While swelling of the tongue is expected after piercing, in severe cases, it can swell significantly enough to close off the airway altogether. The resulting difficulty in breathing can be life-threatening.
- If an inexperienced practitioner pierces the tongue incorrectly, nerve damage can permanently inhibit feeling in the tongue and facial movement. There are nerves at the back of the tongue, which if severed, could lead to permanent numbness, speech impediments and the loss of taste.
- There is also a risk of infection, especially if stringent hygiene practice is not followed. Bacteria can penetrate to the inner tissue of the tongue where it has the potential to cause infections.
- In the long term, tongue piercings can lead to chipped or cracked teeth, because of the continuous rubbing of the metal/plastic against teeth. Tiny cracks can form and cause severe pain and a tooth can fracture and leave the nerve exposed. Sometimes, constructing an artificial crown over the damaged tooth is the only way to save it. Injuries to the gum and cheek tissue are not uncommon either.

Lip Piercing

Lip piercing is where a ring is placed through the lip. These heal relatively quickly, although extra care must be taken during the healing process as food, smoke and liquids that come into contact with the piercing might increase the risk of infection.

Retainers on lip rings can also damage gums, and possibly damage nearby teeth. In some cases, gum grafts are required to repair an affected area. Similar to tongue piercing, nerve damage is also a possibility, affecting facial movement and the ability to feel the affected area.

Contemplating an Oral Piercing?

If you're thinking about getting your tongue or lip pierced here are a few suggestions to make sure you get the correct procedure and ensure your mouth stays healthy once it's in place.

- Ensure the practitioner performing the piercing is experienced, is aware of your oral anatomy and uses strict infection control practices, to guard against the risk of infection or long-term nerve damage.
- Seek immediate medical advice if excessive bleeding, swelling or pain occurs following a piercing.
- If infection occurs seek urgent medical advice.
- Once the piercing is in place, the ADA recommends visiting the dentist every six months. The dentist will be able to closely monitor the piercing and any potential damage to teeth and gums, and this will decrease the likelihood of any long-term damage.
- Athletes undertaking sport should remove their jewellery prior to competing as piercings can be ripped from the skin accidentally.

For more information on oral health and looking after your mouth, visit www.dentalhealthweek.com.au

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