

## **Oral Piercing**

### **What is oral piercing?**

Body piercing is not new. It is an ancient practice that can be traced back thousands of years to various cultures. Oral piercing, however, is a relatively new fad that includes the puncture of oral tissues -- such as the lip, cheek or tongue -- so that an individual may wear ornamental jewelry. The jewelry ranges from metal studs to rings to other decorative pieces. This practice is often referred to as "body art," and has grown in popularity among teenagers and college-age individuals during the last decade. With tongue piercing, for example, the tongue is usually pierced in the middle front with a temporary device that is inserted during the three-to-five week healing period. After that time, permanent jewelry is inserted and left in, or the hole will close up within days.

### **Why is it dangerous?**

There are no licensing or certification standards for individuals who provide body-piercing services. This makes it difficult to control and monitor who performs the procedure and the environment in which the services are provided. There are numerous health and safety concerns at stake -- ranging from how sterile the equipment is to how much training the individual has who is performing the service. In addition, piercing may be painful. Piercing occurs without anesthetics because persons who provide these services are not licensed to administer drugs (only dentists, physicians and podiatrists can prescribe and administer anesthesia). The procedure is often performed in tattoo parlors, hair and nail salons, and in the private homes of those who do piercing. The individuals may have little or no training.

### **What are the risks?**

- Infection is the main danger. Oral piercing may cause serious infection because the inside of the mouth harbors all kinds of bacteria. The site of the piercing can easily become infected. In addition, poor sterilization techniques may increase the risk of infection.
- Swelling. Following piercing, the tongue can swell -- obstructing breathing and making it difficult to swallow.
- Blood clots. When the tongue is involved, there is a risk of blood clots that may produce life-threatening strokes.
- Hemorrhaging, nerve damage and numbness at the site, allergies to metal, toxic shock, blood poisoning, enlarged lips, scars, damaged sense

of taste, and speech impairment are other serious side effects of oral piercing.

- Cracked teeth. This is common with tongue piercing because an individual can easily bite down on the jewelry and crack the teeth.
- Inhaled parts. Jewelry may break apart and the small parts may be inhaled or aspirated in the lungs -- requiring surgical removal.

### **Are there any laws regulating oral piercing?**

In many areas, to pursue oral piercing, an individual must prove he or she is 18 years old. If under age 18, a parent must be present and provide parental consent. Some cities require anyone who performs oral piercing services to purchase licenses to conduct this type of business. They must also prove they have "adequate training" and are piercing under sterile conditions.

### **When should you contact a healthcare professional?**

Most dental professionals oppose any kind of oral piercing. However, if individuals want this procedure done, they should first contact their physician or dentist to discuss the risks. If you have had oral piercing and the wound does not heal or there are signs of infection, get dental or medical help immediately.