

# **TONGUE PIERCING**

## ***Why is it a problem?***

People who undergo body piercing may consider it a form of body art and self-expression, no different from wearing earrings. But piercing on and around the mouth can cause damage to the teeth and mouth tissues.

Dentists who treat young adults are seeing more patients with jewelry inside and around the mouth. Most mouth jewelry takes the shape of removable studs, hoops or barbells purchased commercially. Dentists are often the first to note any harmful effects resulting from the piercing process or the jewelry itself, such as fractures or cracks in the tooth structures caused by a metallic barbell stud.

## ***What damage could happen in the short run?***

Tongue piercing can cause:

- infections
- speech impediments
- breathing problems
- broken teeth.

## ***What about long term damage?***

The damage to the gum line comes from the constant contact between the oral jewelry and the gums. The results can be permanent. They include:

- Receding gums
- Chipped or fractured teeth
- Nerve damage or inflammation at piercing site
- Periodontitis (when the inner layer of the gum and bone pull away from the teeth and form pockets) resulting in loose teeth or tooth loss

## ***What about infection?***

Infection can cause the tongue to swell, blocking or restricting the airway. In addition, bacteria under the tongue often spread quickly and can lead, in extreme cases, to the potentially fatal toxic shock syndrome or blood poisoning.

In addition, piercing has been identified by the National Institutes of Health as a possible vehicle for transmission of hepatitis B, C, D and G, and HIV, if piercing equipment isn't sterilized.

## ***But, I'm young and healthy. It probably won't last.***

In some cases, gums can recede significantly in as little as 5 months.

## ***So, what can I do to help myself if I'm already pierced?***

This type of fast-acting damage means it's critical that you get regular dental checkups.

## ***What kind of oral piercings are common and risky?***

The most commonly pierced oral sites are the tongue and the lip. Tongue piercing may damage gum tissue behind the lower front teeth, while lip piercing may injure gum tissue in front of the lower teeth. And accidentally biting a tongue stud can cause teeth to crack. Studs can come loose and be swallowed or inhaled, leading to breathing problems.

## ***OK, what other problems should I watch out for?***

There is the possibility of a person developing an allergic reaction to a stud if it's not made from gold, titanium or surgical steel.

Other potential dangers include deep cyst formation, scarring, damage to veins and nerves and neuromas - overgrowths of nerve tissue.

Some orthodontists refuse to do any work on people with pierced tongues because of its effect on muscle position and the possible risk of encouraging speech impediments.

Additional negative effects include:

- pain
- post-placement swelling
- prolonged bleeding
- gum injury
- permanent numbness
- loss of taste
- oral hygiene problems

***OK, this all sounds like bad news***

Sorry, it is, unfortunately. Here's something else to think about... Body piercers are unlicensed and not members of the medical profession. Usually, no health histories are taken at tongue piercing appointments, no emergency kits are available, no preventive antibiotics are used, and no post operative care afterwards is available.

Most episodes of tongue piercing may proceed uneventfully, but the severity of reported complications makes the practice difficult to get excited about,

Sources: American Dental Association, Delta Dental, British Dental Association

*A service of the Klotz Student Health Center's Health Promotion Dept.*

For more information,  
please call 818 677-3666 or 677-3692 (tty)

[www.csun.edu/studenthealthcenter](http://www.csun.edu/studenthealthcenter)

California State University  
**Northridge**