

Oral piercing: consider the risks



We'll do whatever it takes and then some.

So your teen wants to pierce his or her tongue?

The problems that can arise from an oral piercing might surprise you. In fact, most dentists discourage oral piercing because of the risks of chipped teeth and infection.

If your teen does get an oral piercing, be sure that he or she keeps the jewelry clean to prevent infections.

If your teen wants to pierce his or her tongue, you might remind your teen about the chipped teeth, drooling, gum damage, nerve damage, taste loss, tooth loss or infection that could occur as a result. The problems that can arise from an oral piercing might surprise both of you. In fact, most dentists discourage oral piercing because of these risks.

- **Chipped teeth.** Fractured teeth are a common problem for people with tongue piercings. The fracture can be confined to the enamel of the tooth and require a filling or it may go deep into the tooth, which may require a root canal or tooth extraction.
- **Swelling.** It is not unusual for the tongue to swell after being punctured, but in some cases the tongue swells so much that it can cut off a person's breathing. In rare cases, doctors may pass a breathing tube through a patient's nose until the swelling subsides.
- **Infection.** Infections from tongue piercings are also common because the tongue is covered with bacteria. The moment the tongue is punctured, these bacteria may be introduced into the blood. A dentist or doctor should be consulted at the very first sign of infection.
- **Allergic reactions.** Make sure that the piercer uses 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.

Keep it clean

If your teen does decide to have his or her tongue pierced, realize that it will take four to six weeks to heal and it may be very uncomfortable. The piercer will place a larger, starter "barbell" in the tongue to give it enough room to heal when the tongue swells. After the swelling goes down, your teen should get a smaller barbell, which will be less likely to get in the way of teeth and more difficult to chew on.

If there are no complications, the barbell can be removed for short periods of time without the hole closing. Some dentists suggest that to protect teeth patients should remove the barbell every time they eat, sleep or engage in strenuous activity. Some piercing parlors sell plugs that can be placed in the hole, so the barbell can be removed for as long as necessary.

Your teen will need to keep the piercing clean. He or she should use an antiseptic mouthwash after every meal and brush the jewelry the same as the teeth to remove any unseen plaque.

Information courtesy of the Academy of General Dentistry

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