



A Risky Fashion Option

Oral jewelry may appeal to teens, but just how safe is it?

First your daughter wanted to get her ears pierced, then her nose. And now your son wants to get his tongue pierced. You're all for self-expression as long as it's harmless — but is it?

When it comes to oral piercings, most dental professionals say no. The possible complications or problems one might encounter immediately after an oral

piercing are similar to what you'd expect after any puncture wound or incision, says Dr. Jerry Smith, a dentist in Thunder Bay, Ont., and ODA President-Elect (2013-14). Namely, pain, swelling and infection, as well as scar tissue formation. However, secondary infections following oral piercings can be quite serious, he says, especially ones involv-

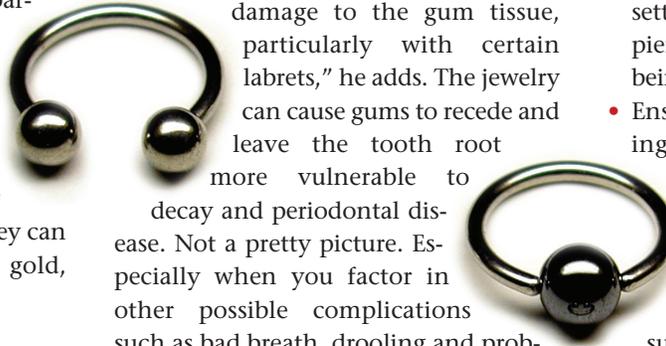
ing the tongue. Dr. Smith has had patients who have required surgery to correct the damage done. "In some cases, the damage wasn't reversible or completely repairable," he says.

If your teen is still set on adding a little oral bling, here's what you need to know to make an informed and safe decision.



What, **exactly**, is an oral piercing?

Oral piercings usually consist of a barbell through the tongue or labret (the space between the lower lip and chin). Other common oral piercing locations include the lips, uvula and cheeks. The jewelry comes in different styles, including labret studs, barbells and rings. They can be made of stainless steel, gold, titanium, plastic or nickel.



Good to know:

Plastic jewelry is less damaging than metal, and nickel may cause allergic reactions.

What **problems** can an oral piercing cause?

Complications vary depending on the location of the piercing, says Dr. Ian McConnachie, a pediatric dentist in Ottawa and an ODA Past President, who regularly treats patients with oral piercings. For piercings through the tongue or lip, or below the tongue, there's a risk of teeth chipping from the stud at the end of the device. Piercings through the floor of the mouth below the tongue or through the tongue have the highest risk of developing into a serious infection. "These areas have a high blood supply and they're located close to major structures such as the airway that can become obstructed as a result of infection," says Dr. McConnachie. "While rare, this can be life-threatening."

There is also a risk of nerve or muscle damage from the piercing. "While this is not usually serious or permanent, it's a little disconcerting for the patient," says

Dr. Rick Caldwell, a dentist in New Liskeard, Ont., and President of the ODA (2013-14). "There can also be damage to the gum tissue, particularly with certain labrets," he adds. The jewelry can cause gums to recede and leave the tooth root more vulnerable to decay and periodontal disease. Not a pretty picture. Especially when you factor in other possible complications such as bad breath, drooling and problems with chewing and swallowing.

Dr. Caldwell says oral piercings have become increasingly less popular with his teen patients. "A particularly bad infection as the result of a tongue piercing was in the news a few years ago. That may have dampened the enthusiasm of some youth," he says.

Good to know:

Constantly playing with and manipulating jewelry once it's been placed in the mouth increases the chances of getting an infection.

What are the best **precautionary measures**?

Dr. McConnachie encourages anyone who is considering a piercing either close to or within the mouth to discuss the matter with a dentist first and to keep these safety measures in mind.

- Check out the cleanliness of the place doing the piercing. Do they have an infection-control policy posted? A recent investigation by the *Toronto Star* and

the Ryerson University School of Journalism found that half of the complaints filed against personal service settings in Toronto, such as tattoo and piercing parlours, involved items not being properly cleaned or sterilized.

- Ensure that the practitioner performing the piercing is experienced and uses strict infection-control practices (an autoclave sterilizer, for example, for non-disposable equipment, and new needles and gloves) to avoid serious infections such as hepatitis B and C, and HIV. Ask for detailed after-care instructions.
- Disinfect your oral jewelry regularly and brush the jewelry the same as you would your teeth.
- If piercings are in close proximity to the teeth, make sure the ends, or even the entire stud, are made of plastic.
- Try to avoid the tongue or the floor of the mouth for piercing because of its higher risk of infection.
- Seek immediate medical or dental attention if you experience excessive bleeding, swelling or pain following a piercing, or if there is any evidence of infection (an odour or fluid from the piercing, for example).
- Visit your dentist regularly so that he or she can closely monitor the piercing and any potential damage to teeth and gums. ■

Good to know:

Check the tightness of your jewelry periodically (with clean hands) to prevent swallowing or choking if the jewelry becomes dislodged.

Toronto Star article:
http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/07/06/tattoo_piercing_technicians_often_lack_hygiene_training_to_safely_star_investigations_finds.html

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