

THE RISKS

A mouth piercing can interfere with speech, chewing, or swallowing. That may seem like a mere inconvenience, until you consider that it may also cause:

- Excessive drooling (something you won't see in hip fashion magazines);
- Infection, pain and swelling;
- Chipped or cracked teeth;
- Injuries to the gums;
- Damage to fillings;
- Increased salivary flow;
- Hypersensitivity to metals;
- Scar tissue; and
- Nerve damage.

The harmful effects can happen during the piercing, soon after, or even long after the procedure.

An infection can quickly become life threatening if it's not treated promptly. For example, oral piercing carries a potential risk of endocarditis, an inflammation of the heart valves or tissues. Bacteria can enter the bloodstream through the piercing site in the mouth and travel to the heart, where it can colonize on heart abnormalities. This is a risk for people with heart conditions and in the worst of cases results in death.

After a piercing, the tongue may swell. There have been reports of swelling serious enough to block the airway. And it's very possible to puncture a nerve during a tongue piercing. If this happens, you may experience a "numb" tongue — nerve damage that is sometimes temporary and sometimes permanent. The injured nerve may affect your sense of taste, or how you move your mouth. And damage to the tongue's blood vessels can cause serious blood loss.

THE JEWELRY

Just touching your mouth jewelry (tongue barbells and lip and cheek labrettes) can lead to infection. Believe it or not, people who have piercings constantly touch them — which is a perfect opportunity for bacteria from hands to enter piercing sites.

The hoop-, ring-, stud-, and barbell-shaped jewelry can also hinder your ability to talk and eat. And food particles that collect around piercing sites can lead to infection. Some people have even swallowed the jewelry — which can puncture the bowel or intestine.

Some people also develop a habit of "biting" the barbells, or "playing" with the balls — which can lead to cracked, scratched teeth; gum damage and recession; and sensitive teeth. There may also be a need for restorations, such as crowns or fillings, and additional dental treatment due to piercing.

Sometimes, uncomfortable, protruding scar tissue can form around the piercing site from the stress of the metal against the inside of your mouth.

The jewelry can sometimes cause allergic responses to the pierced site. The jewelry can even get in the way of dental care by blocking X-rays.

DON'T PIERCE ON A WHIM. THE PIERCING WILL BE AN ADDED RESPONSIBILITY TO YOUR LIFE. IT WILL NEED CONSTANT ATTENTION AND UPKEEP.

HAVE PIERCINGS

- **Contact your dentist or physician immediately with any signs of infection — such as swelling, pain, fever, chills, shaking or a red-streaked appearance around the site of the piercing.**
- **Keep the site clean and free of any matter that may collect on the jewelry by using a mouthrinse after every meal. Look for products that display the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance.**
- **Minimize "clicking" the jewelry against teeth and avoid undue stress on the piercing site. Be gentle. Be conscious of the jewelry's movement when talking and chewing.**
- **Check the tightness of your jewelry periodically — with clean hands — because beads can loosen on their threads. Checking can help prevent you from swallowing or choking on your jewelry.**
- **When taking part in sports, remove the jewelry and protect your mouth with a mouthguard.**
- **See your dentist and maintain your normal oral healthcare schedule by brushing and flossing regularly.**
- **Most important, consider removing mouth jewelry before it causes a problem.**
- **For additional information regarding oral piercing, visit the Web site of the American Dental Association at www.ada.org and click on the Public content area.**