

# The Down Side Of Body-Piercing

As body piercing grows in popularity among both teenagers and their parents, one in five piercings now leads to infection. Emergency medical technicians recently wheeled a 19 year-old woman who had stopped breathing from a drug overdose into a Westchester City hospital. Doctors tried putting a breathing tube down her throat, but their path was blocked by three 1-inch-long metal stud barbells running along the length of her tongue. One doctor got to the point where he said, 'If you have to rip her tongue, just do it.' Eventually they got the tongue out of the way, but her body piercing could have cost her life.

## Infections and Removal Problems

The popularity of piercing various body parts continues to increase, from mainstream thirty-somethings to rebellious teenagers, and they are piercing their bodies in stranger and stranger places - in the mouth, on their navels, through cheeks and even in the genitals.

But doctors are starting to see more of body piercing's disadvantages: oral piercings are causing swollen tongues, excessive bleeding, infection and swallowing of small jewelry parts. In fact, infections from moist or unclean piercing sites now occur in about one out of every five piercings.

Those receiving the piercings are firing back, however, saying that the majority of people know how to take care of themselves with disinfectants. But, according to some medical practitioners, many piercers are providing their services in unsafe environments - no gloves or mask, no sterilization equipment and unsanitary surroundings.

Other hazards come later – when jewelry is removed from the piercing site. Skin dimpling may appear even though the hole has closed up. A second problem is keloids - where scar tissue extends into normal tissue. If a person receives a paper cut and develops a keloid, they may end up with a scar the thickness of a pen. A keloid the size of a pea may develop on an earlobe where an earring once hung. Unfortunately, if you cut out a keloid, another may develop at the same location.

### Caring For Those Little Holes

Each body part presents its own specific danger, such as bleeding, nerve damage or infection and, therefore, requires special attention. Oral piercings, for instance, require an alcohol-free, anti-microbial mouth rinse. Alcohol isn't recommended because it increases the possibility of bleeding. Topical antibiotic creams should not be used for skin piercings because they prevent oxygen from reaching the wound to help it heal. In the upper part of the ear, a serious infection could cause the cartilage to die, leaving permanent

disfigurement. Oozing pus from bellybutton piercings is also quite common.

Treating an infection can be difficult. For example, if someone receives an antibiotic to fight the "streptococcus" bacteria, it may be of no help because they actually need an antibiotic to fight the "gram negative" bacteria found in the mouth.

The most common piercing problem is ripped skin from the jewelry either catching on clothing or being pulled off. But maybe the most serious threat is hepatitis C. Hepatitis C is a blood borne infection that is being seen more and more in medical rooms, and doctors fear it may just be the tip of the iceberg. It causes cirrhosis and cancer of the liver and is the most common reason for liver transplants in the U.S. There is currently no vaccine for hepatitis C. Unsterile equipment, poor follow-up care or the reuse of piercing needles all add to the risk of contracting hepatitis C. Only certain materials should be used in piercing, including titanium, surgical steel, 14-karat and 18-karat gold, and a plastic called Tygon or PTFE. Sterling silver should be avoided because it oxidizes