

A pierced lip or tongue may look cool, but it can be dangerous. Many people are choosing mouth jewelry as a way to follow a trend or create a certain look. But oral piercing isn't just a matter of style — it's a health issue too.

Mouth piercing is not as safe as you might think — especially piercing the tongue, lips, cheeks, or the uvula (the tiny tissue that hangs at the back of the throat). That's because the mouth's moist environment is home to many bacteria, creating an ideal place for infection to start. That's only one of the many problems piercing can cause.



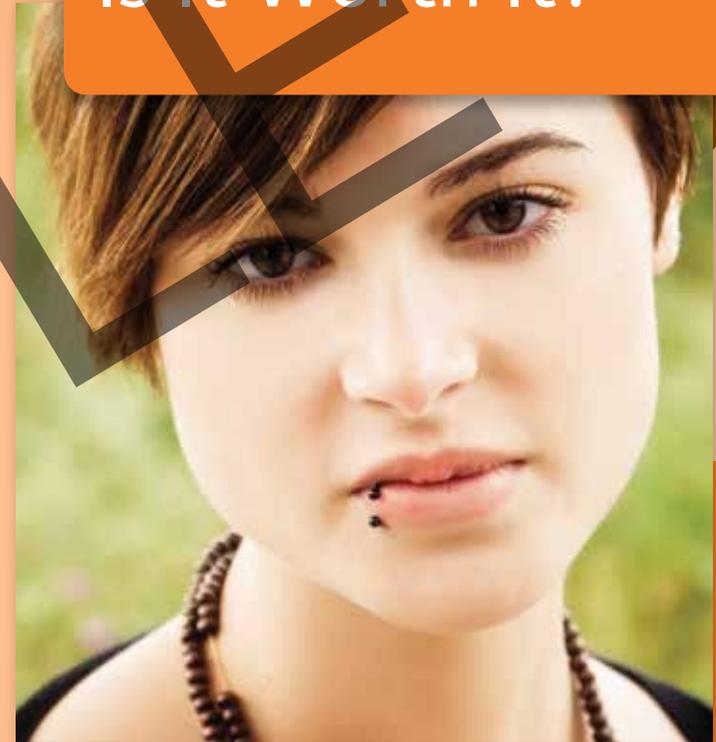
ADA Healthy Smile Tips

- Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.
- Clean between your teeth once a day.
- Eat a healthy diet and limit snacks.
- Visit your dentist regularly.

For more information about taking care of your mouth and teeth, visit MouthHealthy.org, the ADA's website just for patients.



Oral Piercing: Is It Worth It?



Piercing damage photos courtesy of Othman Shibly, DDS, MS, School of Dental Medicine, University at Buffalo, State University of New York

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If you're thinking about getting a piercing — or if you already have one or more — there are some health risks you should know about.

The Risks

For starters, a mouth piercing can interfere with speech, chewing, or swallowing. That may seem like a small sacrifice. But consider that it may also cause:

- **Infection:** Your mouth contains bacteria, which means an oral piercing carries the risk for infection at the site of piercing. Touching your mouth jewelry, such as tongue barbells and lip and cheek labrets, can increase the risk for infection. It also creates a perfect opportunity for bacteria on the hands to infect piercing sites. Also, food particles that collect around piercings are breeding grounds for bacteria.
- **Prolonged bleeding:** Damage to your tongue's blood vessels can cause serious blood loss.
- **Swelling:** Swelling commonly occurs after oral piercing. If your tongue swells too much, it could potentially block your airway.
- **Nerve damage:** In some cases, people may have temporary or permanent nerve damage after a mouth piercing. An injured nerve might make your tongue feel numb. Your sense of taste or how you move your mouth could also be affected.
- **Drooling and difficulty speaking and eating:** Mouth jewelry can cause excessive saliva production. It can also affect your ability to pronounce words clearly. Hoops, rings, studs, and barbells can also get in the way of your ability to talk and eat.
- **Damage to teeth and gums:** Lip and tongue piercings rub against the gums and teeth. Over time this can cause the gums to pull away from the teeth, leaving the tooth root exposed. Some people also develop a habit of biting the barbells or playing with the jewelry in their mouths.

This can both injure the gums and lead to cracked, scratched or sensitive teeth. Even plastic jewelry can do this. This damage may result in the need for dental treatment, such as crowns, fillings or a root canal.

- **Allergic reactions:** The metal may cause an allergic reaction at the pierced site.
- **X-rays:** Mouth jewelry can interfere with dental radiographs (X-rays).
- **Bloodborne disease transmission:** Oral piercing can potentially transmit hepatitis viruses. If piercing instruments are not properly sterilized, they can carry these viruses.

Oral piercing also carries a risk of **endocarditis** (en-doh-card-eye-tis), when the heart valves or lining become infected with bacteria. This can happen when bacteria enter the bloodstream through the piercing site in the mouth and travel to the heart, where they can multiply.

These harmful effects can happen during the piercing, soon after, or even long after the procedure. That's why the American Dental Association opposes the practice of piercing in or around the mouth — because it's bad for oral health.

Damage to Teeth and Gums



Hoop in tongue pressing against upper tooth



Gum recession on upper tooth caused by hoop in tongue

The Bottom Line

Don't pierce on a whim. The piercing will be an added responsibility to your life. The pierced site will need constant attention and upkeep. Are the risks worth it to you?

If You Already Have Piercings...

- **Contact your dentist or physician immediately for any signs of infection** — such as swelling, pain, fever, chills, shaking or a red-streaked appearance around the site of the piercing.
- **Keep the piercing site clean** and free of any matter that may collect on the jewelry by using a mouth rinse after every meal. Look for products with the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance.
- **Minimize clicking the jewelry against teeth** and avoid undue stress on the piercing. 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 prevent you from choking on or swallowing your jewelry.
- **When taking part in sports, remove the jewelry** and protect your mouth by using a mouthguard.
- **See your dentist regularly**, and remember to brush twice a day and floss daily.
- **Most important, consider removing mouth jewelry before it causes a problem.**

