

## Oral Piercing: What You Should Know

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### Are there risks to getting an oral piercing?

**Yes.** Though most people consider piercing a low risk choice, there are significant risks associated with oral piercings. Common symptoms after oral piercing include pain, swelling and an increased flow of saliva. The mouth is full of bacteria and cannot be kept “clean” in the traditional sense. As a result, infection also occurs more readily after oral piercing, and, though not common, can include serious infections, such as hepatitis or endocarditis (inflammation of the tissue surrounding the heart). Additionally, piercers have no standardized training and may have limited knowledge of anatomy and physiology. If a blood vessel or nerve is in the path of the needle during the piercing, severe and difficult-to-control bleeding or nerve damage can result. For some, blood poisoning, metal allergies, or blood clots can occur.

Even after the initial healing process, there is the ongoing risk of serious damage to teeth and gum tissue posed by the mouth jewelry itself. Metal jewelry is often the culprit in cracked or broken teeth. Plastic jewelry reduces this risk, though cannot eliminate it entirely. For piercings of the lips, the “backside” of the jewelry, attached inside the mouth, can be a source of irritation to the opposing tissue. As the metal or plastic rests on the gum tissue, it can abrade and literally wear it away as it moves back and forth. This requires reconstructive surgery to repair and in some instances results in lost teeth. This happens more commonly than people realize. Therefore, it is very important to regularly check the tissues in contact with the metal or plastic piercing to ensure one’s continued health. If the jewelry is causing damage or infection, it is essential to discover this early in the process.

### What if I already have oral jewelry?

If you have an oral piercing, knowing the potential damage the jewelry may cause, you may want to consider removing it

to protect your teeth and gums. If you continue to wear oral jewelry, be sure when participating in sports that you remove the jewelry and wear a mouth guard. Also, with clean hands, regularly check the tightness of your jewelry, as loose jewelry becomes a choking hazard and can damage the digestive tract if swallowed.

### How do I go about choosing a reputable piercer?

Choosing a professional piercer is an important first step when deciding to get an oral piercing. The Association of Professional Piercers (APP), an international non-profit association dedicated to the dissemination of health and safety information related to piercing, provides resources for the public on their website [www.safepiercing.org](http://www.safepiercing.org). The APP recommends that before you choose a piercer you verify that they use an autoclave sterilizer and do not reuse needles. Also, check out the piercing room to ensure that it is clean and ask if aftercare instructions will be given to you. Ask the piercer questions that help you evaluate his/her experience, such as where he/she was trained, what types of classes he/she has taken, and how many years of piercing experience he/she has. Above all, listen to your instincts. If the place does not seem to meet all standards, keep looking.

### It is important to make an informed choice.

Ultimately, the decision to pierce, or not to pierce, is a personal one. We recommend that you consult your CDA member dentist before making such an important decision. When you make that decision, do it fully informed and committed to maintaining your oral health, including daily brushing and flossing and regular dental check-ups.



Photos courtesy of Dr. Lynn Sayre-Carstairs



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