Oral piercing

This fact sheet explains common short and long-term complications caused by oral piercing and how to limit the chance of complications.

What is oral piercing?

Oral piercing involves a needle being passed through the tongue, lips or cheeks to create a hole for inserting jewellery such as studs, rings or barbells. Piercing is usually done without anaesthetic.

Complications caused by oral piercing

Oral piercing can result in a range of serious oral complications. Complications can occur immediately after the piercing or in the longer term.

Post-piercing complications

- Infection can occur, especially if stringent infection control and sterilisation practices are not followed.
- Swelling of the tongue is to be expected after piercing. In severe cases, swelling can obstruct the airway and cause severe breathing difficulties.
- Slight bleeding is to be expected. Excessive bleeding can occur if blood vessels are severed during the piercing process.
- Pain should be expected post piercing.

Longer-term complications

- Teeth can be chipped or fractured due to being constantly bumped with the piercing jewellery, particularly with barbells in the tongue. Microscopic cracks in the teeth caused by piercing jewellery are extremely painful. These cracks are difficult to treat, and often result in the loss of the tooth.
- Gums and inside cheek tissue can experience trauma due to constant rubbing against the gum by the piercing jewellery, particularly with lip (‘la bret’) piercing.
- Oral piercing can interfere with chewing and speaking. Nerve damage caused by an incorrect piercing procedure can cause loss of taste and/or speech impediments.
- Nerve damage due to an incorrect piercing technique can cause facial numbness and/or paralysis.
- There is a risk of infection due to foreign debris and bacteria accumulating in the pierced site.
- There is a risk of contracting blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis and HIV if contaminated piercing equipment is used.
- Hypersensitivity to the metals used in piercing jewellery may be experienced.
- Ongoing swelling and pain may be experienced.

How can I minimise the chance of complications?

Even without complications, healing after oral piercing takes four to six weeks.

You can minimise the chance of complications by following these tips:

- Ensure the person performing the piercing is experienced, is aware of your oral anatomy and uses strict infection control and sterilisation practices.
- Gently suck on chipped or shaved ice to reduce the risk of the tongue swelling due to bleeding.
Seek immediate medical advice if excessive bleeding, swelling or pain occurs following a piercing.

If infection occurs, seek urgent medical advice.

Once the piercing is in place, visit a dental professional every six months so the piercing and any potential damage to teeth can be monitored.

Make sure the size and position of jewellery does not damage teeth and gums. It is preferable to wear good quality plastic jewellery rather than metallic jewellery.

To prevent damage to teeth and gums, remove jewellery before participation in sport and before sleeping.

For more information
- Contact your dental professional
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for confidential health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Email oral_health@health.qld.gov.au.