
Piercings

Summary

- Choose an experienced piercer whose premise is registered with their local council.
 - Only sterilise needles, instruments and jewellery should be used.
 - The provider must give you detailed information about the procedure and how to care for your piercing before the procedure.
 - Care for your body piercing while the site heals. Keep the site clean. Regularly bathe the site with soap and only handle the piercing when necessary.
 - If you experience any pain, swelling, inflammation or discharge, seek medical advice immediately.
-

Body piercing is popular for both men and women. While it is often associated with young people, body piercing has been going on for thousands of years in different parts of the world. In recent years, it has become a popular alternative to more permanent forms of body modification such as tattoos.

Most people are familiar with ear lobe piercing. Other body parts that can be pierced include the upper ears, nose, lips, cheeks, nipples, navel, tongue, eyebrow and genitals. Rings, studs, dumbbells and bars are some of the different types of jewellery that can be used.

Poor practices during piercing procedure can lead to:

- infection including blood-borne viruses
- allergic reactions
- nerve damage.

Always choose an experienced piercer whose premises are registered with their local council.

Piercing yourself or getting a friend to do it is extremely dangerous and is not recommended.

Things to consider before having a piercing

If you are considering getting a body piercing, some things to consider include:

- Piercing may be fashionable now, but trends change. How will you feel about the piercing a few years from now?
- Piercing is painful and the site is usually sore for some time afterwards.
- How will your family and friends feel about your piercing and will it affect your relationships?
- Does your school have a policy on body piercing? You may be required to cover or remove facial or tongue piercings during school hours.
- Having a visible body piercing may be an issue for particular workplaces and could affect your employment opportunities. In some industries, an exposed piercing may be a health and safety issue.

It can be helpful to ask friends with piercings about their experience and notice how other people cope with their piercings.

Laws relating to piercing in Australia

Laws relating to body piercing are different in each state or territory. In some parts of Australia (including Victoria), it is illegal for a piercer to perform 'intimate' body piercing on anyone under the age of 18 years, whether or not consent has been given. This includes piercing of the genitalia, anal region, perineum or nipples.

In Victoria, it is also illegal for a body piercer to perform body piercing on a person under 16 years of age, without

obtaining written consent from:

- the parent or guardian of the person to be pierced
- the person to be pierced, if they are over 10 years of age and have the capacity to consent.

Some piercers have their own age restrictions and may ask for parental consent if you are under a certain age, even if the law in your area does not require this.

Choosing a piercing provider

Choose an experienced piercing provider whose business is registered with the local council.

Don't be afraid to ask questions about the piercer's experience and procedures. If they do not answer your questions, or you are not satisfied or comfortable with them, do not feel pressured – take your business elsewhere.

To comply with health regulations:

- The shop must be kept clean and hygienic.
- Instruments, needles and jewellery used to pierce the skin must be sterile.
- The operator should not have exposed cuts or wounds, and their clothes must be clean.
- The proprietor or operator must provide you with accurate health information before any procedure takes place.

The ideal piercing shop will have:

- good ventilation and lighting
- a separate area set aside for the cleaning, disinfection and sterilisation of instruments
- benches, floors, shelving and furniture that can easily be kept clean – items that may need to be touched (such as spray and ink bottles) should be covered with single-use plastic bags so that only the nozzles are exposed
- a hand washbasin.

Procedure for piercing

When piercing your body, the operator should:

- wash their hands at the beginning and end of the procedure, and whenever they take a break during the procedure – for example, when answering the phone
- clean and disinfect your skin thoroughly before and after the procedure
- wear single-use gloves on both hands throughout the procedure
- use new sterile jewellery for piercings
- use sterile equipment
- never smoke, drink or eat while conducting the procedure
- provide you with information about how to care for your piercing before the procedure.

Piercing equipment must be sterilised

The piercer should be able to explain to you how the equipment is sterilised and ideally should have a steriliser on the premises, or evidence that the equipment has been sterilised offsite.

To make sure equipment is correctly sterilised and to avoid infection:

- All jewellery, needles and instruments must be thoroughly cleaned and sterilised before they are used.
- Reusable instruments should only be used if the piercing premises has its own steriliser or has a system in place for off-site sterilisation. Once sterilised, they must be replaced if they are accidentally touched or contaminated in any other way. Sterility must be maintained at all times.
- It is preferred if operators use pre-sterilised, single-use needles and instruments. These must be disposed of into a sharps container, out of reach of children.
- Jewellery composed of surgical steel, gold (18 carat and above for initial piercings) and titanium are the best

metals as they can be easily sterilised.

- Jewellery containing gemstones (unless they are of high-quality manufacture with solid backing) are not suitable for initial piercing as they may not withstand the sterilisation process. Less than 18 carat gold jewellery or gemstones can be inserted once the piercing has healed.

Preventing allergic reactions to piercing

If you are prone to allergic reactions or suffer from eczema or dermatitis, you should ask for jewellery that doesn't contain nickel.

Preventing piercing cross-contamination

Gloves must not be reused. If the operator is interrupted during the piercing procedure (for example, to answer the phone), they must first remove their gloves and wash their hands. Before recommencing the procedure, they must rewash their hands and put on new gloves.

Skin to be pierced must be clean and free from infection. Instruments can become contaminated with blood, and must be properly cleaned and sterilised between clients. The operator should comply with health regulations at all times to avoid the risk of spreading infection.

Caring for your piercing and avoiding infection

How long your piercing takes to heal depends on where it is, the technique used, the components of the jewellery, how you look after it and your body's own healing ability. Healing time can vary from around two weeks to six or nine months.

The operator should give you detailed information about how to care for your piercing at home. Follow their advice to avoid complications. If you experience any problems, seek advice from your operator or general practitioner.

Some suggestions to care for your body piercing include:

- Keep the piercing as dry as possible.
- Don't touch or turn the jewellery unnecessarily and always wash your hands before and after touching the piercing.
- Do not share jewellery with friends.
- Don't remove the jewellery before the wound has fully healed.
- Do not remove the scab as this protects the piercing from infection.
- Use liquid soap on the piercing site when you're showering or bathing.
- Use a tissue or cotton bud to dry the piercing after a shower or bath. Do not use a towel or face washer.
- Do not use any alcohol-based cleaning solutions, tea tree oil, hydrogen peroxide, skin cleansers, antiseptic solutions or cream. These can dry out the skin and can sometimes result in prolonged healing times.
- Avoid swimming until the piercing has healed as water can pose a risk of infection.
- Keep jewellery in place and the piercing intact by covering it with sticking plaster when exercising or sleeping (if required).

Caring for your oral piercing

Oral piercings can take up to two months to heal. Because your mouth is home to millions of bacteria, it is vital to care for your mouth carefully during this period by:

- not smoking
- brushing your teeth twice a day, and rinsing frequently with warm salty water (1/4 teaspoon salt in one cup of water)

Unhealed piercings are a potential transmission route for infection. These infections include blood-borne viruses.

Complications of piercings

Infection and other complications can occur during the procedure or if the piercing isn't cared for properly afterwards. General complications may include:

- increased pain, redness, swelling, irritation or itchiness around the piercing site
- thick infected discharge from the piercing site – this may be yellow, green or grey and may have an unusual odour
- problems with healing or scarring
- excessive bleeding – this requires prompt medical attention
- rejection and migration – the jewellery is a foreign object that the body may react to, and this may cause it to move from its original position. This is more likely if the piercing is not in the correct position or the jewellery is inappropriate for the initial piercing (material/gauge)
- an abscess (a collection of pus) beneath the skin
- septicaemia, if infection isn't treated early
- serious infectious diseases, such as blood-borne viruses.

An infected body piercing can be treated with antibiotics. See your doctor immediately if complications develop. Do not remove the jewellery until you seek advice.

Consult your doctor and notify the operator if you have any other concerns about the procedure.

Complications of oral piercing

Some of the risks and complications from oral piercings include:

- Infections – piercing the mouth creates a wound at risk of infection from the millions of bacteria normally found in the mouth.
- Prolonged bleeding or nerve damage – if a blood vessel is punctured during the piercing procedure, the bleeding can be difficult to control. Also, numbness (loss of sensation) or ongoing pain (neuralgia) can occur if nerves are damaged.
- Pain and swelling – are common side effects, but in some cases, tongue swelling following piercing can be so severe that it can block the airway and make breathing difficult.
- Blood-borne diseases – oral piercings are a potential risk factor for the transmission of herpes simplex virus and hepatitis B, C and HIV.
- Septicaemia – because a wound is created, oral bacteria may enter the bloodstream and travel to the heart. In susceptible people, this could result in an inflammation of the heart or its valves.
- Gum disease – people with oral piercings have a greater risk of gum disease than those without oral piercings. The jewellery can injure soft gum tissue, causing it to recede. This not only looks unattractive, but leaves the tooth root more vulnerable to decay.
- Damage to teeth – teeth that come into contact with mouth jewellery can chip or crack. Teeth with fillings or crowns can also be damaged.
- Difficulties with normal oral function – tongue piercing can result in difficulty chewing and swallowing food, and speaking clearly. The jewellery can stimulate excessive production of saliva and taste can also be altered, due to the type of metal used.
- Jewellery aspiration – loose jewellery is a choking hazard and, if swallowed or inhaled, could also result in internal injuries and difficulty breathing.

Complications of other piercing sites

Some complications are associated with other piercing sites. These may include:

- navel piercing – infection through torn skin
- nipple piercing – difficulty breastfeeding with an infected nipple (which in women can quickly travel through the milk ducts and into the lymph nodes under the arm) or the growth of a cyst inside the nipple. Irritation or trauma may mean a woman with a nipple-pierced breast may be more likely to experience infant attachment problems or blocked ducts.
- genital piercing – increased risk of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and pregnancy due to condom damage and because the piercing can be an entry point for an infection to enter the body.

People who should avoid piercings

People who should avoid body piercing include those who have a higher risk of infection or complications due to:

- medication – such as anticoagulants, immunosuppressive medication and some corticosteroids
- chemotherapy – which reduces your immunity and makes you more susceptible to infection
- breast implants – in the case of nipple piercing, particularly those implants located in front of the chest muscle
- certain disorders – including heart valve disease, rheumatic fever and skin infections.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An experienced body piercer whose premises is registered with their local council
- Local council
- Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Section, Department of Health Victoria Tel. 1300 651 160
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)

Things to remember

- Choose an experienced piercer whose premise is registered with their local council.
- Only sterilise needles, instruments and jewellery should be used.
- The provider must give you detailed information about the procedure and how to care for your piercing before the procedure.
- Care for your body piercing while the site heals. Keep the site clean. Regularly bathe the site with soap and only handle the piercing when necessary.
- If you experience any pain, swelling, inflammation or discharge, seek medical advice immediately.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - RHP&R - Health Protection - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2021 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.