

Oral piercing: Source of fashion or tissue destruction?

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Abstract

Oral piercing is gaining a name these days. People interested in this trend, should be aware that it is not without health risks. Oral piercings involving the tongue, lips, cheeks, and uvula have been associated with pathological and life threatening conditions. Dentists are often the first to note any harmful effects resulting from the oral piercing process or the jewellery. The aim of the present article is to develop awareness of the various risk factors and complications caused by oral piercing among the young's and adults.

Keywords: Oral piercing, Studs, Barbells, Hoops.

Introduction

Now a day's piercing in different regions of the body has become an emerging practice among young adults. This practice has been performed for centuries by some ethnic groups as part of traditional rituals¹ and has recently become more common among youths². Adolescents and young adults are found more frequently inclined towards the use of an intraoral jewellery and piercings of oral and perioral tissues. People consider body piercing as a form of body art, no different from wearing earrings. But they are not aware of the harmful effects of piercing on and around the mouth which can cause severe damage to the teeth and oral tissues. Dentists who treat young adults are seeing more patients with jewellery inside and around the mouth. People get their body parts pierced for many reasons, whether to get noticed and fit in or just purely for experimental purposes. Whatever the case may be, body piercings, especially in the lip and tongue, can be a very dangerous practice for a number of reasons.

Oral piercings involves the tongue, lips, cheeks, and uvula and the jewellery consists of studs, barbells or hoops made of stainless steel, 14-18 carat gold, titanium or niobium. The devices must be removable. Piercing is generally an unregulated practice occurring in a multitude of diverse setting and is usually performed by unlicensed individual³. Before taking a decision for oral piercing as a fashion statement, there are some things one should know about it.

Risk and Complications from Oral Piercing

Infection is the first and most common consequence of oral piercings. Since oral cavity is full of harmful bacteria there are chances that an infection can possibly occur after an oral piercing. Despite performing invasive procedures, many body piercers do not have any formal education on sterilization, effective skin care and proper infection control.⁴ There are often chances of fatal blood poisoning by the bacteria residing under the tongue who often spread quickly and can also cause the tongue to swell, blocking or restricting the airway. A life-threatening condition called as

Ludwig's angina is also caused by acute bacterial infection of the floor of the mouth. The bacteria gain access in the bloodstream via an open wound such as piercing site followed by the swelling from inflammation which will further block the air passage and prevent saliva from being swallowed.⁵ Endocarditis could result if individuals have a history of heart conditions⁶. Contaminated piercing equipment can lead to other infections such as blood borne hepatitis (B, C, D and G) as well as HIV and AIDS. Consequently, piercing may include an increased risk of the transmission of tetanus,⁷ syphilis tuberculosis,⁸ and cerebral abscess.⁹

The infection, if left untreated, can advance to gum disease, which will cause permanent destruction of teeth and the tissue surrounding them. This practice has been directly related to dental and gingival injuries on the lingual aspect of the anterior lower teeth in cases of tongue piercing and to buccal gingival recession in cases where the lip stud is located such that it can traumatize the gingiva.¹⁰

Other recent studies have demonstrated the pierced tongue or lip with the metal jewelry resting against soft gum tissue often cause recession of the gums lying just opposite to it due to continuous trauma against the gums and the teeth, which ultimately lead to the attachment loss, bone loss and finally lead to tooth loss. When gums recede, the bone underneath is reabsorbed by the body. Campbell and others evaluated the effect of time (in years) and size of the stem and the barbell of tongue piercings in relation to gingival trauma and tooth damage. They found that tongue piercing can be an important causative agent in the development of gingival recession of the lower anterior teeth and was also associated with dental trauma in molars.¹¹ However with due course of time, reconstructive gum surgery may be required to repair the gum loss

Oral piercings can affect both oral and orthodontic health. Few orthodontists are not in favour to do any work on people with pierced tongues as it has an adverse effect on muscle position and cause a possible risk of encouraging speech impediments. With tongue piercings, many people develop a damaging habit of pushing the barbell implants or

studs up against and between their upper incisors or two front teeth, it can cause habitual pushing of the tongue stud caused a maxillary midline diastema¹². The research, which was carried out at the University at Buffalo in New York, suggested tongue piercings could be a major cause of unnecessary orthodontic issues, created a gap or space significant enough to require orthodontic work and braces.

People with a tongue piercing are susceptible of chipping and cracking in front of their teeth. Dentists are often the first to note any harmful effects resulting from the piercing process or the jewellery itself, such as fractures or cracks in the tooth structures caused by a metallic jewellery. It is often noticed that the young and the adolescents tends to play with their piercing by pushing it against teeth there by causing minor cracks or even breakage of the crown portion of the tooth. Most of the piercings are made of metal which may cause damage to the enamel

The other wide range of serious problem, complications and side effects are toxic shock syndrome, airway obstruction, glomerulonephritis, including pain, scar formation, tooth fractures, metal hyper-sensitivity reactions, speech impediment, and nerve damage, excessive bleeding, swelling, scarring and galvanic currents produced by the jewellery.

Safety Precautions to be Taken Before Oral Piercing

1. A careful examination of the piercing studios must be done
2. The studio must be run by a licenced and knowledgeable person.
3. One should look for the presence and use of an autoclave sterilizer and disposable items such as gloves and swabs on each and every client.
4. Examine about cleanliness and inquire about their sterilization methods.
5. All devices and jewellery should be stored in sterilized packages.

Conclusion

We don't recommend oral piercings but still the increase in demand of oral piercing the dental and the medical practitioner should be aware of the pros and cons of it. They should be prepared not only to address the complications but also provide information to the patients as, they are the first person to notice and have become the primary educators for oral piercing. Health care professional should be able to educate their patients about the various risk factors, measures to reduce risk factors and adequate home care for oral piercing. It is concluded that the oral complications are quite frequent with oral piercing. Many of these problems can be avoided if effective legal and hygienic measures were adopted.

Conflict of Interest: None.

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