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The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

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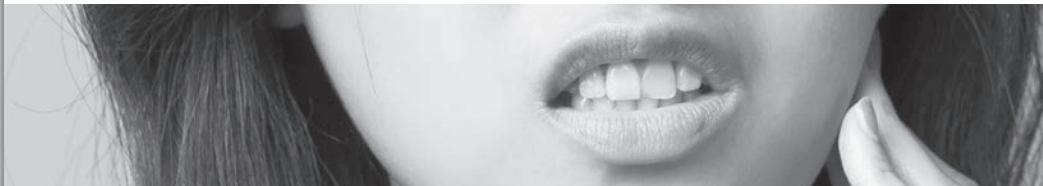
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# Oral Piercing— An Oral Health **DON'T**

**T**his fall saw multitudes of students returning to college at many of the Boston-area schools, but some may be returning home for Thanksgiving or winter break with more than just their laundry to be washed. While many consider having their ears pierced a rite of passage, today’s teens and young adults are often turning to another type of piercing as a fashion statement—oral piercing.

In tongue piercing, a barbell-shaped piece of jewelry is placed through the thickness of the tongue with a needle. The end of the jewelry is then placed through the hole and a backing is screwed on. In lip and cheek piercing, a cork is positioned inside the mouth to support the tissue as it is pierced with a needle. The needle is inserted through the tissue and into the cork backing, and then replaced with jewelry and a backing that is screwed into place. Healing typically takes four to six weeks but can sometimes take months, and oral piercings are usually administered without anesthesia, which may be reason enough to avoid them for squeamish types.

Today, body piercing is seen as a fashion statement, worn as accessories, as innocuous as wearing a ring or a necklace. Some view it as art, while others view it as an expression of their identity. However, oral piercing, which involves the tongue, lips, or cheeks, has actually been implicated in a number of harmful dental conditions and could be a potential risk to your health.



## Be aware of the risks involved:

- INFECTION** Nerve damage
- HEPATITIS** Gum recession
- EXCESSIVE BLEEDING**
- Speech impediments**

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) discourages patients from getting oral piercings because of their serious oral health complications, including:

- **Redness and/or swelling** at the piercing site. In certain cases, swelling from a tongue piercing can be so severe that it actually closes off the airway and blocks breathing.
- **Infection.** The mouth is full of bacteria that can enter the piercing site and cause an infection. Handling the jewelry with unclean hands can also transmit bacteria, and food particles that accumulate around the jewelry can breed bacteria, as well.
- **Excessive bleeding** can occur at the piercing site from damaged blood vessels.
- **Nerve damage can develop** if the piercing is done incorrectly, resulting in numbness and change in perception of taste.
- **Gum recession can occur**, especially with barbell-type jewelry where there can be constant rubbing of the metal against the gum tissue.
- **Teeth can be damaged** when the metal jewelry that comes into contact with teeth causes breaks or cracks, especially while eating, talking, or sleeping, or if the wearer continuously “plays” with the jewelry.
- **Allergic reactions** to the metal can occur at the piercing site.
- If the jewelry comes loose, **it could be easily swallowed and pose a choking hazard.**

**Other side effects have been reported**, including scar-tissue formation and speech impediments due to an increase in saliva flow and/or from having a foreign object in the mouth. The National Institutes of Health has even linked hepatitis to oral piercing.



**Did You Know?** Oral piercings are usually administered without anesthesia.

**Still considering getting an oral piercing?** The MDS wants you to be aware of the risks involved. But if you do decide to get an oral piercing, it's important that you do your research and choose a professional piercer who uses a fresh needle every time. Ensure that the equipment is properly sterilized and that the right type of metal is used—usually, surgical-grade, stainless-steel jewelry is less likely to cause an allergic reaction.

**Already have an oral piercing?** You will want to be sure to maintain the best oral hygiene possible to prevent infection at the piercing site. Use an antiseptic mouthwash after every meal, and brush the jewelry as you would your teeth to remove any food particles or bacteria. Once the piercing has healed, consider removing the jewelry before eating, sleeping, or any type of physical activity. Also, make sure to have regularly scheduled dental checkups, because your dentist will be able to spot any potential problems, such as soft-tissue damage or cracked teeth.

When it comes to making a fashion statement, oral piercings may look cool, but returning home from school with good grades and a healthy smile look so much better.