

## Review Article

### Oral Piercing/Art- Fashion or Risk

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#### Abstract:

Body piercing is known for over 5000 years. It has its historical meaning, but lately so called body art becomes a fashion, especially among the young people. The most common regions for body piercing are: ears, nose, superciliary ringe and navel. Oral piercing also becomes more and more popular. Oral piercing mostly involves the lips, tongue, and cheeks, with tongue being the most commonly pierced intraoral site. The most common oral complications are bleeding, swelling, speech difficulties, gingival recessions and damage to the dental structure such as chipping teeth, dental cracks and fractures, displacement of jewellery to the soft tissues.

Keywords: Oral Piercing, Tongue Piercing, Body art.

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#### Introduction

Aesthetics has become an important issue over the past few years and has led to the development of new materials and techniques in dentistry. Body decoration has also gained influence.<sup>1</sup> Body art is the term usually applied to tattooing, and the wearing of jewellery in unconventional sites. In the developed world, the expression of individualism through body art such as tattooing and body piercing has become popular, especially in the young. Adolescence is a period of tremendous transformation in body appearance and the evolution of the adult mind. The appearance of the teenager becomes a means of communication, a language to express self-identity. Body art is one means of expression.

Nevertheless, nearly 80% of those with piercings are over 29 years of age, and nearly 60% are in married or long-term relationships.<sup>2</sup> Irreversible changes to the human body have been practised by ancient as well as modern civilizations for a variety of reasons. Some changes are made to express spiritual devotion or dedication to magic, to fulfil social demands, to make a personal statement or to enhance individual sex appeal.<sup>1</sup> Piercings are also sought for their sexual and spiritual benefit.<sup>3</sup> Growing popularity of intraoral piercing which involves the insertion of jewellery into the oral soft tissues including the lips, cheeks, fraenum and tongue. While there have been numerous reports of Complications

associated with this procedure. Most involve barbells, rings or studs and are made of gold, silver or stainless steel.



**Figure 1:** Oral Piercing



**Figure 2:** Tongue Piercing

### History of Piercing

Throughout history people have decorated and altered the appearance of their bodies in many different ways. Body piercing is one of the oldest forms of adornment and body modification.<sup>4</sup> The earliest known representation of this piercing was in the figure of a dog created in Egypt in around 1500 BC, when it was considered a symbol of royalty. Ancient Egyptians pierced their navels to signify royalty. Mayans pierced their tongues for spiritual purposes and in North America; body piercing was a tradition of the Native Americans.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 3:** Lip Piercing



**Figure 4:** Fraenulum Piercing

The culture of body piercing dates back till 3000 BC. Egyptians used to pierce their navels, Mai – tongues. It was believed to help them in spiritual contacts. Although decorating body with jewellery is not something new, it barely has its symbolic meaning. It is common among the African and Southern African tribes. In European culture body piercing symbolizes taking part in some social groups and is associated to risky behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Often piercing is associated with negative emotions and more unanticipated behaviour. *Tyody art* is the term usually applied to tattooing, scarification, and the wearing of jewellery in unconventional sites.<sup>7</sup> Ear piercing and body painting as commonly seen in the West are not included under that term. In other parts of the world, piercing of oral tissues and the placement of objects such as large plates (Amazonian tribes), plugs, wires, or rings (Dogon tribe of Mali and Toposa tribe of Sudan) appear to have religious, sexual, tribal, or marital significance. Oral and perioral piercing

involve the insertion of jewellery into the tongue, lip, cheek, frenum, uvula or other part of the mouth, has long been practiced for religious, tribal, cultural, sexual or identity reasons.<sup>8</sup> For ancient Mayans, piercing was a symbol of spirituality, virility and courage. Eskimos inserted a "labret" into the lower lip as a symbol of passage to adulthood in boys and as an act of purification in girls. The piercing of lips, cheek or tongue was also a traditional practice in Hindu, Chinese and American Indian cultures.<sup>9</sup> Indians belonging to the Hindu faith celebrate a religious ceremony called *Thaipuram*. During that ceremony, Hindu devotees carry a heavy, ornamented contraption called *Kavad* and walk barefoot through the streets in a trance from one temple to another. This ritual is performed as an act of penance or in fulfilment of a vow. The Kavadi weight is centered on the waist, and metal spikes of the Kavadi pierce the skin of the torso. Cheeks and tongue are also pierced with silver slivers.<sup>8</sup> In Southern India, a vow of silence was accompanied by tongue piercing.<sup>10</sup> The oral and perioral piercing has a long history as part of religious, tribal, cultural or sexual symbolism and now days there is a high incidence of oral and perioral piercing in the adolescent population. This practice has a long history as part of religious, tribal, cultural or sexual symbolism. Of significance to the dental profession is the growing popularity of intraoral piercing which involves the insertion of jewellery into the oral soft tissues including the lips, cheeks, fraenum and tongue.

#### **Lip labret piercing history**

The piercing of the lips for the insertion of objects into them is very widely practised throughout the world, however only two tribes pierce the lips with a ring; the Dogon tribe Of Mali, and the Nuba of Ethiopia. Among the Dogon the piercing of the lip has religious significance, they believe that the world was created by their

ancestor spirit "Noomi" weaving thread through her teeth, but instead of thread out came speech. Among the tribes of Central Africa, and South America the Labret piercing is stretched to extremely large proportions, and large wooden or clay plates are inserted. Among the ancient Aztecs and Mayans labret piercing was reserved for male members of the higher castes, they wore beautiful labrets fashioned from pure gold in the shape of serpents, golden labrets with stones inset and ones of jade or obsidian (labret in Aztec "Tentel"). The Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest and the Inuit peoples of northern Canada and Alaska wore labrets fashioned from walrus ivory, abalone shell, bone, obsidian, and wood.

#### **Tongue piercing history**

Since the first report of oral piercing in the medical literature in 1992. Tongue piercing was practised in a ritual form by the ancient Aztecs, Mayas of Central America and the Haida, Kwakiutl, and Tlingit tribes of the American Northwest. The tongue was pierced to draw blood to propitiate the gods, and to create an altered state of consciousness so that the priest or shaman could communicate with the gods.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Complications of Oral Piercing**

The most common oral complications are bleeding, swelling, gingival recessions and damage to the dental structure such as chipping teeth, dental cracks and fractures.<sup>12,13,14,15,16</sup> Local complications may be divided to early and late complications.<sup>12</sup> The most common early complications are swelling and bleeding after the procedure of body-piercing.<sup>12,13</sup> Swelling lasts usually no longer than one week.<sup>12</sup> This may cause difficulties in speaking.<sup>14</sup> Halitosis and higher saliva secretion may also occur.<sup>12,17</sup> Also local infections and paresthesia are quite common.<sup>14,16</sup> Another local complication is displacement of the jewellery to the soft tissues. This usually refers to the tongue.<sup>14</sup> Late complications appear some time after

the procedure of body-piercing and are not a result of procedure itself but rather a result of contact of the jewellery with surrounding tissues.<sup>12,13,18</sup> The constant contact of oral jewellery with teeth may cause tooth damage. The most common are chipping teeth, dental cracks and abrasion.<sup>12,13,18</sup> Mostly the lower incisors are inflicted.<sup>14,18</sup> Late complications refer not only to teeth but also to periodontal site. Gingival recessions are more common at patients with piercing at the oral cavity and usually refer to mandibular incisors.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

The general lack of awareness of complications related to oral piercing needs to be addressed by the dental community. Education programs at high school may be a starting point; however, the treating dentist may also play an active role in examining and informing patients with oral piercing on the possible short and long-term complications associated with this form of body art.

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