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

Information in WORD OF MOUTH articles comes from dental health care professionals of the MDS and other leading professional dental organizations, including the American Dental Association. If you have any questions about specific content that may affect your oral health, please contact your dentist. For timely news regarding oral health, visit the "For the Public" section of the MDS Web site at [www.massdental.org](http://www.massdental.org).

Your comments and suggestions regarding WORD OF MOUTH are always welcome. All correspondence and requests for additional copies may be forwarded to Melissa Carman, Managing Editor, c/o Massachusetts Dental Society, Two Willow Street, Suite 200, Southborough, MA 01745-1027, or email [mcarman@massdental.org](mailto:mcarman@massdental.org).

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### ... Is Not Golden to Your Oral Health

To help educate teens and young adults as to the health dangers of oral piercings, the MDS created a brochure, "All That Glitters... Is Not Golden to Your Oral Health." This informative brochure, along with other brochures covering such topics as the oral health and overall health connection, mouthguards, and the dangers of too much soda consumption, is available to teachers, parents, and children. To request a free copy, contact Bethann Dacey, MDS communications coordinator, at [bdacey@massdental.org](mailto:bdacey@massdental.org) or visit us online at [www.massdental.org/for-the-public](http://www.massdental.org/for-the-public).



**The history of oral piercing** dates back to ancient times. The earliest known oral piercing, in the figure of a dog, was created in Egypt in 1500 B.C. and was considered to be a symbol of royalty. Later, Mayan and Aztec cultures administered ritualistic tongue piercings as a religious offering to honor their gods. It's probably safe to say that the people in these cultures did not consider the oral health implications of their oral piercing actions.

Fast-forward to today. In this day and age, an earring stud or hoop protruding out of someone's tongue or lip is not an unusual sight. Today, body piercings are 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 a form of expressing 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. So when it comes to making a fashion statement with oral piercing, you're better off just saying "pierce out."

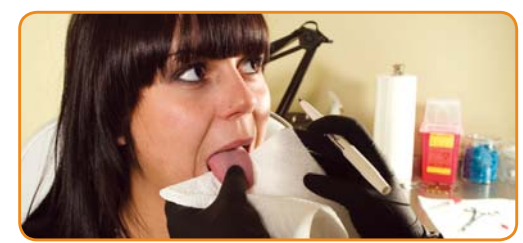
In tongue piercing, a barbell-shaped piece of jewelry is placed through the thickness of the tongue with a needle. The end of the jewelry is then placed through the hole and a backing is screwed on. In lip and cheek piercing, a cork is positioned inside the mouth to support the tissue as it is pierced with a needle. The needle is inserted through the tissue and into the cork backing. The needle is then replaced with jewelry and a backing 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 more squeamish types.

## SIDE EFFECTS Serious Oral Health Complications

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 can actually close off the airway and block 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, including numbness and change in taste, if the piercing is done incorrectly.
- » **Gum recession** can occur, especially with barbell-type jewelry, where the constant rubbing of the metal against the gum tissue can actually cause recession.
- » **Damage to the teeth.** The metal jewelry that comes into contact with teeth can cause breaks or cracks, especially during 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.



## Oral piercing may leave you vulnerable to INFECTION



### Still considering getting an oral piercing?

If you do decide to get an oral piercing, 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—typically, 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 unseen plaque. 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 a healthy smile looks so much cooler.