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TONGUE PIERCING INCREASES IN POPULARITY

Oh, my aching tongue!

Health care providers generally come equipped with our own set of bias. As a dental hygienist, I found my first encounter with a pierced tongue a bit unnerving. My initial reaction fell somewhere between "grossed out" and mortified. Within the last year the number of tongue piercings I have seen has grown. And, while I do not recommend or support tongue piercing, I decided it was time to become better informed about the procedure.

Body piercing is not a new craze. Most piercings have tribal origins, which date back many, many years. Remember those pictures in National Geographic showing rings and bars through various parts of the anatomy? In the head area alone, piercing sites include ear cartilage, ear lobe, nostril, septum, eyebrow, lip, cheek, labret and tongue. Piercing the tongue is currently running second to the ever-popular ear piercing.

The first tongue piercing was done in the U.S. about ten years ago. While Montana is not exactly setting the trend, more and more tongue piercings are being performed. If you are thinking about having your tongue pierced you should be aware of risks and expectations before having the procedure. A piercing is a foreign object, and the body naturally wants to get rid of it. It is a puncture wound that needs special care.

Selecting a studio and piercer

Montana currently has NO laws regulating piercers or piercing studios. This means it is YOUR responsibility to select a site for a safe piercing experience. Guidelines set out by the Association of Professional Piercers (APP) include such considerations as:

- Check the **autoclave** (sterilizer) and spore test
If there is no autoclave, RUN!
- **ALL** needles should be individually packaged and opened while you are present.
Piercing guns are a NO-NO!
- The studio should appear clean
See the piercing room and set up before your procedure
- Studio's age requirement - usually 18 without parental permission
Most studios have an age requirement even if no state laws exist
- Ask questions of staff and piercer

Do they seem knowledgeable and well informed? Are there plaques or certificates on the walls?

- Make sure they provide an **AFTERCARE** information sheet
This should be read **BEFORE** your piercing procedure

The Procedure

Options for tongue piercings include centre, off-centre, horizontal and tongue web piercing. Variations can include multiple piercings with a mixture of jewelry.

“Standard” tongue piercings are done using a straight barbell, usually between 14gauge to 10 gauge. The length needs to be 50% longer than the tongue at rest to accommodate the swelling that will occur.

A strong mouthwash is used and then the “piercing site” is marked on the tongue and checked by you. The tongue is then held in a clamp. A needle is passed through the tongue and followed through with the jewelry. Then the clamp is removed and the bead is placed.

Aftercare

Full healing of the site takes 4 weeks, though the primary healing (swelling and discomfort) takes a week or less.

Following the tongue piercing, it is imperative that aftercare procedures are heeded. This will include the daily use of antibacterial or peroxide based mouthrinse products and special cleaning instructions. It is necessary to rinse the mouth with an appropriate antibacterial solution after **ANYTHING** goes in the mouth (except water or ice).

It is important not to play with the piercing for the first 4-6 weeks beyond the necessary movement to speak and eat. Avoid chewing on fingernails, pencils, sunglasses, etc. during healing.

A complete list of procedures for care should be given to you and strictly followed.

Risks and Considerations

Anything you do to your body can have possible side effects. This is true with tongue piercing. **SOME** of the risks are:

- The tongue swells 2-3X normal size the first 48 hours
Ice, cold nutritional drinks, and elevation of the head when sleeping are

recommended

- Speech, taste and swallowing disturbances, especially in the initial healing stage
- Infection—if you get an infection **LEAVE YOUR JEWELRY IN!** This allows the pus to drain out and avoid an abscess.
- Nerve damage or hemorrhaging—proper placement is imperative, every tongue is different
- Chipping teeth—biting on the jewelry or clicking it against the teeth can cause tooth chipping. To avoid this, replace the balls with acrylic balls, which are kinder to the teeth.
- Gum and bone erosion—when the bead puts constant pressure of the gums or roof of the mouth it can cause erosion of the bone and gum. This is minimized by proper placement and correct length of bar post.

After becoming more “informed” about tongue piercing I haven’t changed my mind much. The bottom line is; this is an unregulated procedure and I wouldn’t recommend latching onto the trend. If you decide that tongue piercing is for you, be smart and get informed.