



Review Article

Glimpsing beyond the glitter: Navigating the depths of oral piercings

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22-03-2024

Accepted 30-03-2024

Available online 11-06-2024

Keywords:

Oral piercing

Infections

Silver

Oral health

Knowledge

ABSTRACT

This review article delves into the multifaceted realm of oral piercings, exploring their implications for oral health and beyond. We navigate through the motivations driving individuals to adorn their mouths with piercings, ranging from self-expression to cultural identity. Despite their allure, oral piercings harbor a myriad of risks, including infection, trauma, and dental complications, which demand careful consideration. We dissect the intricate interplay between piercings and oral anatomy, highlighting their potential to disrupt oral hygiene practices, erode tooth enamel, and exacerbate periodontal disease. Moreover, we scrutinize the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of piercings, unraveling their impact on self-image, social perceptions, and interpersonal dynamics. Moving forward, we chart a course for managing and preventing complications associated with oral piercings, advocating for comprehensive counseling, education, and preventive strategies. By fostering collaboration between healthcare providers, piercers, and policymakers, we aim to promote safer and more inclusive practices that prioritize the health and well-being of individuals with piercings. Finally, we glimpse into the future of oral piercings, envisioning emerging trends and innovations that promise to redefine the landscape of piercing culture. Through this comprehensive exploration, we endeavor to illuminate the complexities of oral piercings, empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their oral health and self-expression.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of oral piercings

Oral piercings involve the insertion of jewellery into various areas of the mouth, including the tongue, lips, cheeks, and gums. These piercings have become increasingly popular among individuals seeking to express their individuality or cultural identity. While oral piercings have aesthetic appeal for some, they also raise significant concerns regarding their potential impact on oral health and overall well-being.

1.2. Historical perspective

Oral piercings have a long history, dating back to ancient civilizations where they held cultural, religious, or social significance. In modern times, their popularity has surged, influenced by trends in fashion, music, and pop culture. However, the practice of oral piercing has evolved considerably, with advancements in techniques, materials, and sterilization protocols.

1.3. Popularity and prevalence

Oral piercings are prevalent among diverse demographic groups, including adolescents, young adults, and individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Studies indicate a significant increase in the prevalence of oral piercings in recent decades, particularly among adolescents and young

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adults. The widespread availability of piercing studios, along with the influence of social media and celebrity culture, has contributed to their popularity. Despite their widespread appeal, oral piercings pose inherent risks and potential complications that warrant careful consideration and evaluation.^{1,2}

2. Types of Oral Piercings

2.1. Tongue piercings

Tongue piercings involve the insertion of jewelry through the tongue, typically in the midline or lateral edges. Common types of tongue piercings include the midline tongue piercing (often referred to as "tongue piercing") and the tongue frenulum piercing (referred to as "web piercing"). These piercings can vary in placement and jewelry style, such as straight barbells, captive bead rings, or tongue studs.

2.2. Lip piercings

Lip piercings encompass a variety of placements within the lip area, including labret piercings (center of the lower lip), Monroe piercings (above the upper lip resembling a beauty mark), and vertical labret piercings (through both the lower lip and the tissue above the chin). Lip piercings may use different types of jewelry, such as labret studs, hoops, or rings, depending on the desired aesthetic and comfort.

2.3. Cheek piercings

Cheek piercings, also known as dimple piercings or cheekbone piercings, involve the insertion of jewelry through the soft tissue of the cheek. These piercings are typically placed horizontally through the cheek, near the cheekbone. Cheek piercings may utilize straight barbells, captive bead rings, or dermal anchors as jewelry options.

2.4. Gum piercings

Gum piercings, also called smiley piercings or frenulum piercings, involve piercing the small fold of tissue connecting the upper lip to the gums (frenulum). These piercings are often discreet and may use small, circular barbells or captive bead rings as jewelry. Gum piercings are less common than other types of oral piercings but still present unique considerations and potential risks.

Each type of oral piercing comes with its own set of risks, complications, and aftercare requirements, which should be thoroughly understood by individuals considering these modifications. Additionally, proper placement, technique, and hygiene practices are crucial for minimizing potential complications and promoting optimal healing outcomes.^{3,4}

3. Oral Anatomy and Physiology

3.1. Oral cavity structure

The oral cavity comprises various structures, including the teeth, gums, tongue, cheeks, lips, and hard and soft palate. Each of these structures plays a vital role in functions such as chewing, speaking, and swallowing. The oral mucosa, which lines the inside of the mouth, is composed of epithelial tissue that protects underlying structures and facilitates sensation.

3.2. Potential risks associated with oral piercings

Oral piercings pose several risks due to the complex anatomy and physiology of the oral cavity. These risks include infection, bleeding, nerve damage, allergic reactions to metals in jewelry, and damage to teeth and dental restorations. Additionally, oral piercings can interfere with oral functions, such as speech and chewing, and may contribute to oral hygiene challenges.

3.3. Healing process and complications

The healing process of oral piercings is influenced by factors such as placement, jewelry type, individual anatomy, and aftercare practices. Complications during the healing period may include pain, swelling, infection, and delayed healing. Improper aftercare, such as poor oral hygiene or trauma to the piercing site, can exacerbate these complications and prolong the healing process.

Understanding the complex anatomy and physiology of the oral cavity is essential for individuals considering oral piercings, as well as for piercers and healthcare providers involved in their care. Proper placement and technique, adherence to hygiene protocols, and vigilant monitoring of healing progress are critical for minimizing risks and promoting successful outcomes. Additionally, individuals with oral piercings should be educated about potential complications and advised to seek prompt medical attention if any concerns arise.⁵

4. Oral Piercing Procedure

4.1. Techniques and equipment

Oral piercing procedures involve the use of specialized equipment, such as sterile needles, forceps, and jewelry insertion tools. Piercers typically follow established protocols to ensure the safety and precision of the piercing process. Techniques may vary depending on the type of piercing and individual anatomy, with piercers employing different approaches to achieve optimal placement and minimize discomfort.

4.2. Sterilization and hygiene protocols

Maintaining strict sterilization and hygiene protocols is crucial to prevent infections and other complications associated with oral piercings. Piercing studios are required to adhere to industry standards for sterilization of equipment, including autoclaving or chemical disinfection methods. Additionally, piercers should practice proper hand hygiene and wear personal protective equipment to minimize the risk of cross-contamination.

4.3. Regulations and legal considerations

Oral piercing procedures are subject to regulations and legal requirements to ensure patient safety and adherence to professional standards. Depending on the jurisdiction, piercing studios may be required to obtain licenses or permits, comply with health and safety regulations, and maintain records of procedures performed. Piercers must also obtain informed consent from clients, provide thorough aftercare instructions, and adhere to ethical guidelines regarding client confidentiality and professional conduct.

Understanding the intricacies of oral piercing procedures, including the techniques used, sterilization protocols, and legal considerations, is essential for both piercers and individuals seeking piercings. By adhering to established standards and best practices, piercers can minimize the risk of complications and ensure the safety and satisfaction of their clients. Likewise, individuals considering oral piercings should research reputable piercing studios, inquire about their sterilization practices, and carefully weigh the potential risks and benefits before undergoing a procedure.^{6,7}

5. Potential Risks and Complications

5.1. Oral infections

Oral piercings create open wounds in the oral mucosa, making individuals susceptible to bacterial, viral, and fungal infections. Poor hygiene practices, inadequate sterilization of equipment, and contact with contaminated materials can increase the risk of infection. Common oral infections associated with piercings include bacterial cellulitis, oral thrush (candidiasis), and viral infections such as herpes simplex virus (HSV).

5.2. Dental and periodontal complications

Oral piercings can lead to various dental and periodontal complications, including tooth fractures, enamel erosion, and gingival recession. The presence of oral jewelry can cause trauma to the teeth and soft tissues during chewing, speaking, or sleeping, leading to structural damage and increased susceptibility to decay and periodontal disease.

5.3. Nerve damage

Placement of oral piercings carries the risk of nerve damage, particularly in sensitive areas such as the tongue and lips. Nerve injuries may result in altered sensation, numbness, or loss of function, impacting speech, taste perception, and oral motor control. Severe nerve damage can have long-term consequences and may require surgical intervention to repair.

5.4. Allergic reactions

Oral piercings often use metal jewelry, such as stainless steel, titanium, or gold, which can trigger allergic reactions in susceptible individuals. Allergic responses may manifest as localized inflammation, itching, or dermatitis around the piercing site. Hypersensitivity reactions to metals are relatively common and can complicate the healing process of oral piercings.

5.5. Speech and swallowing difficulties:

Oral piercings can interfere with normal oral functions, leading to speech impediments, difficulty swallowing (dysphagia), or excessive salivation (ptyalism). Jewelry placement and size may impede tongue movement or alter oral anatomy, affecting articulation and oral coordination. In severe cases, oral piercings may contribute to aspiration or choking incidents.^{8,9}

Understanding and mitigating the potential risks and complications associated with oral piercings is essential for individuals considering these modifications and healthcare providers involved in their care. By promoting awareness of these risks and advocating for safe piercing practices, individuals can make informed decisions about their oral health and well-being. Additionally, prompt recognition and management of complications are crucial for minimizing adverse outcomes and promoting successful healing of oral piercings.

6. Oral Piercings and Oral Health

6.1. Impact on oral hygiene practices

Oral piercings can significantly impact oral hygiene practices by creating challenges in cleaning the piercing site and surrounding oral structures. Accumulation of plaque and bacteria around the jewelry can increase the risk of oral infections, gum disease, and tooth decay. Individuals with oral piercings must adopt meticulous oral hygiene routines, including regular brushing, flossing, and rinsing with antibacterial mouthwash, to maintain optimal oral health.

6.2. *Effects on tooth enamel and gum health:*

The presence of oral piercings, particularly in areas of high contact with teeth and soft tissues, can lead to mechanical trauma and abrasion. This may result in enamel erosion, tooth wear, and gum recession over time. Additionally, the pressure exerted by oral jewelry against the gums can contribute to tissue damage, inflammation, and periodontal disease. Routine dental examinations are essential for monitoring the effects of oral piercings on dental and periodontal health and addressing any concerns promptly.

6.3. *Association with periodontal disease:*

Research suggests a correlation between oral piercings and an increased risk of periodontal disease, characterized by inflammation and infection of the gum tissues and supporting structures of the teeth. Factors contributing to this association include the accumulation of plaque and bacteria around the piercing site, trauma to the gums from oral jewelry, and compromised oral hygiene practices. Individuals with oral piercings should be educated about the importance of regular dental check-ups and professional cleanings to prevent and manage periodontal disease effectively.

Understanding the impact of oral piercings on oral hygiene, tooth enamel, gum health, and periodontal disease is essential for promoting informed decision-making and facilitating preventive measures among individuals considering or currently sporting oral piercings. Dental professionals play a crucial role in providing guidance, education, and preventive care to minimize the potential risks associated with oral piercings and preserve long-term oral health and well-being.^{10,11}

7. **Psychological and Sociocultural Aspects**

7.1. *Motivations for getting oral piercings*

Individuals may be motivated to get oral piercings for various reasons, including self-expression, cultural identity, fashion trends, and peer influence. Oral piercings can serve as a form of self-expression and personal adornment, allowing individuals to express their unique style and personality. Additionally, cultural and social factors may play a role in shaping perceptions of oral piercings, with certain communities or subcultures embracing these modifications as symbols of identity or belonging.

7.2. *Social perceptions and stereotypes*

Oral piercings are often subject to social perceptions and stereotypes, which can vary widely depending on cultural norms, generational differences, and individual preferences. While some may view oral piercings as fashionable or edgy, others may perceive them as unprofessional, rebellious, or indicative of risky behavior. These perceptions can influence

how individuals with oral piercings are perceived in various social and professional contexts, potentially affecting their self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for employment or social acceptance.

7.3. *Psychological implications*

The decision to get an oral piercing can have psychological implications for individuals, impacting their self-image, self-confidence, and sense of identity. For some, oral piercings may serve as a source of empowerment and self-expression, enhancing feelings of autonomy and individuality. However, others may experience feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or social stigma associated with their piercings, especially if they face judgment or discrimination from others. Additionally, individuals may grapple with concerns about the permanence of their piercings, potential regrets, or the need to conform to societal norms.

Understanding the psychological and sociocultural aspects of oral piercings is essential for healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers involved in promoting oral health and supporting individuals with piercings. By recognizing the diverse motivations, perceptions, and experiences associated with oral piercings, stakeholders can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that respects individual choices and promotes positive oral health behaviors and outcomes.¹²

8. **Management and Prevention**

8.1. *Counseling and education*

Counseling and education play a crucial role in the management and prevention of complications associated with oral piercings. Healthcare providers, including dentists, piercers, and other allied professionals, should offer comprehensive information to individuals considering oral piercings. This education should encompass the potential risks, complications, and aftercare requirements associated with piercings, as well as strategies for minimizing these risks and promoting optimal healing outcomes. Additionally, individuals with existing oral piercings should receive ongoing counseling and support regarding oral hygiene practices, regular dental check-ups, and strategies for managing complications effectively.

8.2. *Complication management*

Prompt recognition and management of complications are essential for minimizing the impact of oral piercings on oral health and overall well-being. Healthcare providers should be prepared to address common complications such as infection, swelling, pain, and trauma to oral tissues. Treatment may involve prescribing antibiotics, providing analgesics or anti-inflammatory medications, and offering guidance on proper wound care and oral hygiene practices.

In severe cases, complications such as nerve damage or allergic reactions may require referral to specialists for further evaluation and management.

8.3. Preventive strategies

Preventive strategies aim to reduce the likelihood of complications associated with oral piercings and promote optimal oral health outcomes. These strategies may include screening individuals for contraindications to oral piercings, such as pre-existing dental or medical conditions that increase the risk of complications. Additionally, piercers should adhere to strict sterilization protocols, provide thorough aftercare instructions, and recommend high-quality, biocompatible jewelry to minimize the risk of infection and allergic reactions. Healthcare providers should also emphasize the importance of regular dental check-ups, professional cleanings, and oral hygiene practices for individuals with oral piercings to prevent oral health issues and monitor for potential complications.

By implementing comprehensive counseling, education, complication management, and preventive strategies, healthcare providers can support individuals with oral piercings in maintaining optimal oral health and well-being. These efforts can help minimize the risk of complications, promote positive oral health behaviors, and empower individuals to make informed decisions regarding their oral health and piercings.¹³

9. Future Directions and Conclusion

9.1. Emerging trends and innovations

The field of oral piercings continues to evolve with advancements in piercing techniques, materials, and technologies. Future trends may include the development of biocompatible materials for oral jewelry, such as titanium or medical-grade plastics, to reduce the risk of allergic reactions and promote better healing outcomes. Additionally, innovative techniques such as laser piercing or 3D-printed jewelry may offer alternative options for individuals seeking oral piercings. Furthermore, advancements in digital imaging and virtual reality may enable piercers to simulate piercing placements and outcomes, enhancing precision and customization for clients.

9.2. Recommendations for further research

Despite advances in our understanding of oral piercings, several areas warrant further research to address gaps in knowledge and improve patient outcomes. Future studies could explore the long-term effects of oral piercings on dental and periodontal health, including their impact on tooth wear, gingival recession, and bone loss. Additionally, research is needed to investigate the psychological and

sociocultural factors influencing individuals' decisions to get oral piercings and their experiences following piercing procedures. Furthermore, comparative studies evaluating the efficacy of different piercing techniques, materials, and aftercare protocols could inform evidence-based guidelines for safer and more effective piercing practices.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, oral piercings represent a complex intersection of personal expression, cultural identity, and oral health considerations. While oral piercings can serve as a form of self-expression and empowerment for individuals, they also pose inherent risks and potential complications that require careful consideration and management. Healthcare providers play a crucial role in educating individuals about the risks and benefits of oral piercings, providing comprehensive counseling and support, and implementing preventive measures to minimize complications. By fostering collaboration between healthcare providers, piercers, researchers, and policymakers, we can continue to advance the field of oral piercings and promote safer, more inclusive practices that prioritize the health and well-being of individuals with piercings.

11. Source of Funding

None.

12. Conflict of Interest

None.

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Cite this article: Srivastava R, Priyadarshi S. Glimpsing beyond the glitter: Navigating the depths of oral piercings. *Int J Oral Health Dent* 2024;10(2):75-80.