

# Dangers of Tongue Piercing

By [Marielaina Perrone DDS](#) on July 2nd, 2012



Radiograph Showing Swallowed Piercing

**Tongue Piercing** dangers. It is very hard to believe or understand how certain things ever become popular. But they do like, pet rocks, 8 track tapes, and the rubik's cube. Fortunately over time, these fads fade away into oblivion. The latest craze over the last few years has been **tongue piercing**. *Tongue Piercing* has become very popular, especially among teenagers and young adults. Most people generally believe that **tongue piercing** is a safe and fun way for young people to express themselves, similar to piercing our ears. Unfortunately, tongue piercing can cause significant damage to our teeth as well as risks to our general health. According to one study, 16% of the females and 4% of the males at a prominent U.S. University had a tongue piercing. The tongue piercing fad may come and go, but for people with pierced tongues, the adverse effects could last a lifetime. Tongue piercing can result in chipped or broken teeth, infections, gum and nerve damage, excessive drooling, taste sensation loss, and tooth loss. Irritation from the jewelry can cause periodontal disease or even oral cancer. So for a teenager or young adult, it may seem cool but damaged and missing teeth, infection, and life threatening cancer are far from cool.

Approximately 45-50% of people who have worn tongue jewelry for four or more years have chipped or fractured their teeth. This damage can eventually send people to the dentist for fillings, crowns, root canal therapy, or even extractions. Because tongue jewelry from a tongue piercing can break or chip teeth, people wearing this jewelry may have to spend thousands of dollars on dental work to regain the smile they will want and desire later in life .

## **Infection**



Infection from tongue piercing

The tongue is covered with bacteria, and when pierced, that bacteria can get in the blood stream and underlying tongue tissues. This can cause a serious infection. Unfortunately, tongue piercing jewelry wearers may not be aware of a problem since the symptoms of infection, such as swelling, redness, and pain, are quite similar to the after effects of the piercing itself. Dentists are learning very quickly that oral infections can also lead to infections in other parts of the body. If you have certain health conditions like [diabetes](#), heart disease, joint replacements or congenital heart conditions, you will be even more susceptible to developing infection.

Dentists have reported a rise in cases of [Ludwig's angina](#), a very severe infection of the floor of the mouth and jaws, in patients who have a tongue piercing. In Ludwig's angina, the tongue may swell to the point that it constricts the airway causing breathing to be difficult.

Another condition afflicting patients with a tongue piercing is [endocarditis](#), a disease which occurs when bacteria enters the blood stream and infects the heart valves while weakening them. This can occur in certain patients with underlying ( often undiagnosed and without symptoms) heart problems.

## Oral Cancer

Patients with a tongue piercing may develop ulcers in the oral cavity from constant irritation. These ulcers can possibly progress to oral cancer. Precancerous ulcers can be detected during an oral cancer screening by your dentist. For patients with a tongue piercing, it is doubly important to see your dentist regularly.

## **Broken or Chipped Teeth**



### Damage from Tongue Piercing

It is not uncommon to see perfectly healthy teeth chipped or fractured from a tongue piercing. People chip teeth on tongue piercings while eating, sleeping, talking and chewing on the jewelry. The fracture can be confined to the enamel of the tooth and require just a simple filling or it may go deeper into the tooth, which may require a root canal, tooth extraction, or crown. This can often happen when a person carelessly biting on the tongue jewelry during chewing or sleeping.

## Allergic Reactions

Developing an allergic reaction is not uncommon depending on the type of metal the piercing is made of. Some types of tongue piercings are not high quality surgical grade stainless steel and a person can experience an allergic reaction even if they do not typically have metal allergies. Please be aware of the type of tongue piercing being placed before going ahead with it.

## Disease Transmission

Oral and tongue piercings are a potential risk factor for the transmission of hepatitis B and C and herpes simplex virus.

## Nerve Damage and Prolonged Bleeding

Numbness or loss of sensation at the site of the tongue piercing or movement problems can occur if nerves have been damaged during the piercing. Blood vessels can be punctured leading to prolonged bleeding.

## Periodontal Disease



Gingival Recession Caused by Tongue Piercing

People with a tongue piercing have a increased risk of periodontal disease than those without a tongue piercing. The jewelry can come into contact with gingival tissue causing injury which can cause recession of the gum tissue ( and possibly bone loss). This can lead to loose teeth and tooth loss.

## **Difficulties in Daily Oral Functions and Possible Aspiration of Jewelry**

Tongue piercing can result in difficulty in speaking clearly and enunciating properly. Chewing and swallowing food can also be a challenge. This is because the tongue piercing jewelry stimulates excessive salivary production. Temporary or permanent drooling is another consequence of increased saliva production. Altered taste can also be present. Jewelry that becomes loose in the mouth can become a choking hazard and, if swallowed, can result in injury to the digestive track or lungs.

Another problem that is of concern is that few standards for body piercers exist. Dental offices must follow strict guidelines (developed by [OSHA](#) and the [CDC](#)) for sterilization and infection control. Contaminated tools used in tongue piercing can expose people to an increased risk for serious infections like [hepatitis](#) and [HIV](#).

If a person does decide to have his or her tongue pierced, they should know that it will take 4-6 weeks to heal and it may be very uncomfortable during that time. The piercer



Radiograph Showing Bone Loss Due to Tongue Piercing

will place a larger, starter barbell jewelry in the tongue to give it enough room to heal when the tongue swells. After the swelling goes down, he or she should get a smaller barbell, which will be less likely to get in the way of teeth and more difficult to chew on.

If there are no complications, the barbell can be removed for short periods of time without the hole closing. Some dentists suggest that to protect teeth patients should remove the barbell every time they eat, sleep or participate in a strenuous activity. There are also plugs available to place in the hole, so the jewelry can be removed for as long as needed.

You will need to keep the tongue piercing clean and use an antiseptic mouthwash (example [Listerine](#)) after every meal and brush the jewelry the same as you would your own teeth to remove any unseen plaque. See your dentist or doctor at first sign of infection or change to the area surrounding the piercing.

Most importantly, people with pierced tongues should see a dentist and dental hygienist regularly to make sure tongue, surrounding tissues, and teeth stay healthy.