

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**BODY PIERCINGS**

Localized skin infections and allergic skin reactions appear to be the most frequent complications of body piercing. A skin infection may result from the introduction of bacteria into the piercing site. Blood-borne illnesses, like HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C, can be spread by infected blood and contaminated piercing needles. To decrease the risk of complications, take the time to research, talk to people who have piercings, and visit several piercing studios before choosing one.

**HOW DO I PICK A PIERCING STUDIO?**

When visiting piercing studios, ask the following questions:

- ❖ What is the piercer's training? Choose a licensed piercer if possible. Most piercing artists are unlicensed, and most states do not require piercers to have formal training.
- ❖ What is your piercer's level of experience and how do they stay up-to-date with current practices and knowledge? Ask to look at the piercer's photo portfolio.
- ❖ Does the studio offer free consultation with a piercer? The piercer should inspect your anatomy, discuss jewelry selection, the procedure, risks/complications, healing process, and aftercare.
- ❖ Will the studio allow you to observe a piercing before making a decision?

Be sure that the artist always:

- Washes their hands first, and uses disposable gloves.
- Uses needles, tools, and jewelry that are sealed in individual sterile packages. These packages should only be opened in the customer's presence. Never allow a piercer to use a reusable piercing gun or a needle that was soaked in liquid.
- Thoroughly cleans the piercing site with an antimicrobial solution.
- Gives clear aftercare instructions both verbally and in writing.

**WHAT ARE OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER BEFORE GETTING A PIERCING?**

- ❖ Are you immunized against hepatitis B? Most states do not require piercers to be vaccinated against hepatitis B, which can be transmitted through infected blood and contaminated needles. Protect yourself by being sure you have completed the hepatitis B vaccine series prior to the piercing.
- ❖ Have you been diagnosed with a congenital heart disease? If so, talk to your medical provider first about ways to decrease the risk of serious complications, such as infectious endocarditis.
- ❖ Do you or a family member have a history of keloids? If so, you are at risk of developing a keloid at the piercing site.

**WHAT IS THE HEALING TIME?**

Healing times vary depending on which part of the body is being pierced.

- Navel piercings and certain genital piercings: up to one year.
- Nipple piercings: 6 weeks to 6 months.
- Ear, facial, and oral piercings: up to 6 weeks.

**HOW SHOULD I CLEAN MY PIERCING?**

It is important to keep piercing sites clean to promote healing and decrease the risk of infection:

- Always wash your hands prior to touching your piercing.
- You do not need to rotate the piercing when cleaning it.
- ❖ For body piercings:
  - Rinse with sterile saline as needed. The sterile saline should be labeled for use as a "wound wash" (0.09% sodium chloride should be the only ingredient).
  - Consider cleaning with a mild, fragrance-free liquid anti-microbial soap or a glycerin-based soap (such as Softsoap) once daily as needed. Be careful not to over-wash the piercing and make sure to thoroughly rinse off soap.
- ❖ For oral piercings:
  - Rinse 4-5 times daily (after meals and at bedtime) for 30-60 seconds with any of the following:
    - A non-iodized sea salt solution (1/8-1/4 tsp of non-iodized salt in 1 cup of warm distilled or bottled water) and/or
    - An antibacterial & antimicrobial **alcohol-free** mouthwash.
    - Sterile saline as needed. The sterile saline should be labeled for use as a "wound wash" (0.09% sodium chloride should be the only ingredient).
    - Plain clean water.
  - Use ice chips or cool fluids to reduce swelling and pain during the initial healing period.

- Brush regularly with a soft-bristled toothbrush, floss daily, and get routine dental checkups.
- Avoid smoking, which is known to lengthen the healing time of oral piercings.
- ❖ Avoid overcleaning or using strong cleaning products as this can irritate tissue and delay healing:
  - Do not use alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, iodine, Hibiclens, harsh soaps (ie. Dial), ointments, or any product containing Triclosan.
  - Do not use benzalkonium chloride for cleansing because it does not have adequate antibacterial coverage and may be contaminated with other microorganisms.
- ❖ Other tips for preventing infection:
  - Avoid touching the piercing site when you are not cleaning it.
  - Wear loose, breathable clothing around the piercing site.
  - Wash your bedding frequently.
  - Avoid submerging piercing in lakes, rivers, hot tubs, pools, etc. You can wear a waterproof wound-sealant bandage to keep the area dry.

### **WHAT ARE SIGNS OF AN INFECTED PIERCING?**

- ❖ Localized skin infections are the most common infectious complication resulting from body piercings, especially navel and ear piercings.
  - Bacterial infections of the piercing site are most commonly caused by *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. Signs of an infection include redness, swelling, discharge (which may have a foul odor), increased pain, and/or fever.
  - A “localized piercing pimple” is a single small bump or pustule adjacent to the piercing site. It can be tender, red, and/or itchy. It is treated as a minor localized skin infection.
- ❖ Systemic infections are less common and more serious than localized infections. They are more likely to occur in those with amateur body piercings or in those who have not followed aftercare instructions. Examples include:
  - Local skin infections that have spread to the bloodstream.
  - Blood-borne diseases, such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV.
  - Infection of the heart valves (infectious endocarditis), a rare complication that is more likely to occur in individuals with congenital heart disease.
- ❖ **SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF YOU HAVE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:**
  - Redness, swelling, and/or pain around the piercing. Red streaks extending from the site are a sign of a rapidly spreading infection and require immediate medical attention.
  - Large amounts of thick discharge, with or without a foul odor.
  - Fever, chills, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and/or confusion.

### **WHAT ARE OTHER POTENTIAL COMPLICATIONS?**

- ❖ Allergic reactions are the most common noninfectious complication of body piercing.
  - Signs of an allergy or sensitivity to the material used in body jewelry include itchiness, red-ness, & swelling around the piercing site. These symptoms can be confused with an infection.
  - To help decrease the risk of sensitivity or allergy, choose body jewelry containing 14K gold, surgical stainless steel, niobium, or titanium. Avoid nickel which is a common allergen.
- ❖ Other localized reactions can include bleeding, tissue trauma, scarring, and keloid formation.

### **WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR INFECTED PIERCINGS?**

- ❖ Bacterial Skin Infections
  - It is controversial whether or not to remove the piercing when an infection is present. In some cases, the piercing is not removed because it can act as a drainage site if pustular discharge is present. Other literature recommends removing the jewelry/hardware as it may be contaminated with bacteria.
  - Mild infections may respond well to an antibiotic cream or gel, such as mupirocin (Bactroban).
  - Moderate to severe infections often require oral antibiotic therapy (Keflex, Bactrim, Cipro or other antibiotics).
  - If a boil or abscess is present, warm compresses and/or saline soaks (4 times daily for 10 minutes) are used to promote drainage. Do not squeeze or attempt to open the abscess yourself. Large abscesses may require surgical drainage by a trained healthcare professional.
- ❖ Localized Piercing Pimples
  - Use warm saline soaks/compresses (4 times daily for 10 minutes) until symptoms have resolved for 2 weeks. An antibiotic cream or gel may be prescribed in some cases.
  - Antihistamine medications (eg. Zyrtec, Claritin, Allegra, or Benadryl) can help decrease itching.
  - Massaging the area after it has healed may help prevent a recurrence.

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:** [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com), [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov), [www.safepiercing.org](http://www.safepiercing.org)