

# The piercing truth about tongue splitting and oral jewelry

**S**ome people like the personal image created by tongue splitting and oral piercings, but this look comes at a price. Tongue splitting and piercings that involve the tongue, lips, cheeks or uvula (that tiny piece of tissue that hangs at the back of your mouth) can be risky.

## PROCEDURE-RELATED RISKS

**Pain and swelling.** As with any wound, tongue splitting and piercing can cause pain and swelling. The swelling can be so severe that it interferes with your ability to breathe.

**Infection.** Tongue splitting and piercings also pose the risk of infection. Cases of tetanus infection have been reported after body piercing.<sup>1,2</sup> Your mouth is full of bacteria that can infect the piercing site or tongue once it is cut. In addition, handling oral jewelry brings the bacteria on your hands in contact with the site, which can cause infection. Food that collects around the jewelry also provides an opportunity for bacteria to breed at the site.

Wounds created during tongue splitting and oral piercing allow bacteria from the mouth to enter the bloodstream. In people with oral piercings, these bacteria have been associated with endocarditis, a serious infection involving the heart.

**Bleeding.** Blood vessels in the tongue can be damaged during oral modifications, which can cause serious bleeding.

## JEWELRY-RELATED COMPLICATIONS

**Chipped teeth.** People with oral piercings may bite or play with the jewelry in ways that can cause it to come into contact with the teeth, crowns or restorations (fillings). This contact can chip or crack teeth or restorations.

**Gum damage.** Constant contact with the jewelry can cause the gingivae (gums) to recede, or pull away, from the teeth, which can cause your teeth to become sensitive to hot and cold. Gum recession exposes the roots of your teeth, leaving them vulnerable to bacteria and acids in food that can cause tooth decay and other damage.

**Interference with radiographs.** Mouth jewelry can block the transmission of x-rays required to produce a radiograph. Your dentist needs clear images to perform a complete oral health evaluation. Radiographs can help your dentist detect tooth decay and gum disease or abnormalities such as cysts or tumors.

**Gum-tissue overgrowth.** The gum tissue surrounding oral piercings can grow over the jewelry, a process referred to as embedding. Embedded jewelry may need to be removed surgically.

**Swallowing or inhalation.** There always is the possibility that the jewelry can come loose. As with any loose object in your mouth, it presents a choking hazard if it falls into your trachea (windpipe). You also can swallow loose jewelry, which can damage your digestive system.

These are just some of the complications related to these trendy oral modifications. So, although they may seem like a fun way to express yourself, tongue splitting and oral piercings are not without risks. Before deciding to go this route, consider the possible effects such a choice can have on your oral and overall health. ■

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1. Dyce O, Bruno JR, Hong D, et al. Tongue piercing: the new “rusty nail”? *Head Neck* 2000;22(7):728-732.
2. O’Malley CD, Smith N, Braun R, Prevots DR. Tetanus associated with body piercing. *Clin Infect Dis* 1998;27(5):1343-1344.