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## Mind the (Teeth) Gap — And Other Hazards of Body Piercings

Not that we ever had an impulse to consider piercing anything but an ear, but if we had, the research that crossed our desk this week would pretty much have killed it. Two reports illustrate some of the potential hazards of making holes in body parts that are perhaps better off left in their virgin state. But we'll let you be the judge of that.



First, there was a [case study](#) by researchers at the University at Buffalo published in the Journal of Clinical Orthodontics, dealing with a 26-year-old woman who developed a gap between her two front teeth because of a barbell tongue piercing. Specifically, the gap occurred because she played with the piercing in her mouth. (A common behavior among the tongue-pierced, according to another Buffalo study.)

Sawsan Tabbaa, first author of the study and an assistant professor of orthodontics at the UB School of Dental Medicine, says the patient brought photos taken before the piercing — no space. After seven years with the tongue-piercing, there was a gap exactly as wide as the diameter of the stud, Tabbaa tells the Health Blog. “I told her, ‘I will not treat you until you take this thing out,’” she says. The patient did so, and braces closed the gap.

Plenty of other side effects have also been associated with tongue-piercing, including [other teeth and gum problems](#), pain and swelling, local infection, chewing problems, nerve damage, scar tissue, [aspiration of the stud](#) and even [brain abscesses](#). Just attempting the procedure may cause problems, as it did for the 17-year-old boy who is the subject of a [2006 case study](#) published in the Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery and evocatively titled “Loss of a Sewing Needle in the Tongue During Attempted Tongue Piercing.”

Separately, a [study published](#) in the Journal of the American College of Surgeons looked at the risk factors behind the development of breast abscesses in women. Smoking was a biggie, but so was nipple piercing. And abscesses took as long as seven years post-piercing to develop, the authors write. They hypothesize that the association is due to the presence of a foreign body, which can be a site of infection and/or scarring from the piercing that interferes with ductal drainage. (We say: Yow.)

Nipple piercing has also been associated with [mastitis](#), [abnormal milk production and breastfeeding](#), and [toxic shock syndrome](#).

“We propose that nipple piercing is not a benign procedure, and potential risks should be explained to women, particularly young women, who are at risk in this population,” the authors — from the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine — write.

And that’s pretty much the message Tabbaa wants to get out about tongue-piercing — there are risks to what may seem to be a benign procedure. “I tell my patients, ‘Go put three or five holes in your ear, but don’t pierce your tongue,’” says Tabbaa.

*Image: University at Buffalo*

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