BODY PIERCINGS

Body piercings are common in the college-aged student. Approximately 30% of people 18-25 years of age and 22% of people 26-40 years of age have at least one body piercing, not including ear piercings.

WHAT IS THE HEALING TIME?
Depending on the site of the piercing, it can take up to one year to complete the healing process. General healing times are as follows:

✧ 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 in order to promote healing and decrease the risk of infection.

❖ For body piercings:
  ✧ Use saline or non-iodized sea salt soaks (1/4 tsp of salt in 1 cup of warm water) 1-2 times per day, and/or…
  ✧ Cleanse with a mild, fragrance-free liquid anti-microbial soap (such as Provon or Optiscrub) or a glycerin-based soap (such as Softsoap) once daily.

❖ For oral piercings:
  ✧ Rinse 4-5 times daily (after meals and at bedtime) with…
    - A non-iodized sea salt solution (1/4 tsp of salt in 1 cup of warm water) and/or…
    - An antibacterial & antimicrobial alcohol-free mouthwash.
  ✧ Brush regularly with a soft-bristled toothbrush, and floss daily.
  ✧ Avoid smoking, which is known to lengthen healing time.

❖ Avoid the following products:
  ✧ 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.
  ✧ Do not “over-clean” or use strong cleaning products because this can cause tissue irritation and delay healing.

❖ Avoid touching the piercing sites when you are not cleaning them.

WHAT ARE POSSIBLE RISKS?
Health risks from piercings include infections and other skin reactions. To decrease potential complications, we recommend examining several piercing studios before selecting one because:

✧ Most body piercing artists are unlicensed, and most states do not require piercers to have formal training.
✧ Most states do not require piercers to be vaccinated against hepatitis B, which can be transmitted through infected blood and contaminated needles.

We also recommend watching the artist place a piercing first:

✧ The site of the body piercing should be thoroughly cleaned with an antimicrobial solution.
✧ The piercer should use disposable gloves and disposable or adequately sterilized needles before each procedure.
✧ After-care instructions should be given by the studio.
Potential health risks include:

- **Localized Infections**
  - Signs of infection of the piercing site include redness, swelling, pus-like discharge (which may have a foul odor), increased pain, and/or fever.
  - The most common types of bacteria that infect piercings (especially navel and ear piercings) are *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*.
  - 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 infection.

- **Systemic Infections**
  - These are less common and more serious than localized infections.
  - Examples include:
    - Local skin infections that have spread to the bloodstream.
    - Blood-borne diseases, such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV. In the US, there have been no definitive cases of HIV caused by body piercing.

- **Other Localized Reactions**
  - Bleeding, tissue trauma, and scarring.

- **Allergic Reactions**
  - People can mistake an “allergy” or “sensitivity” to the material used in the body jewelry for an infection.
  - Signs of an allergy or sensitivity include redness and itchiness around the piercing site.
  - To help decrease the risk of sensitivity or allergy, choose body jewelry containing 14K gold, surgical stainless steel, niobium, or titanium.

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

- In most cases, the piercing is NOT removed during the infectious period because it acts as a drainage site for the infection.
  - Mild infections may require an antibiotic cream or gel, such as mupirocin (Bactroban).
  - Moderate to severe infections will require oral antibiotic therapy (eg. Keflex, Bactrim, or Doxycycline).
  - If a boil or abscess is present, warm compresses and/or saline soaks 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.

- Treatment for a localized piercing pimple includes the following:
  - Warm saline soaks or compresses should be applied several times daily. Continue this for 2 weeks after symptoms resolve.
  - Antihistamine medications (eg. Zyrtec, Claritin, Allegra, or Benadryl) may be used to treat itching and inflammation.
  - An antibiotic cream or gel may be prescribed in some cases.
  - Massaging the area after it has healed may help prevent a recurrence.

**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.
- Large amounts of thick discharge, with or without a foul odor.
- Fever, chills, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and/or confusion.

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:**

- [www.mayoclinic.com/health/piercings/SN00049](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/piercings/SN00049)
- [www.safepiercing.org](http://www.safepiercing.org)