

# Body Piercing

Body piercing has been recorded from ancient civilizations and can be seen in art and antiquities. Body piercing has recently become common in many countries, particularly among young persons. The February 25, 2004, issue of JAMA includes an article about serious infections related to piercing of the ear cartilage.

## SITES OF BODY PIERCING

Piercing has been performed in nearly every area of the body. Cultural ideas influence the types of piercing commonly done in different parts of the world. In the United States, common piercing sites include the earlobe, ear cartilage, eyebrow, tongue, lips, nose, and **umbilicus** (belly button). Less visible sites include the nipples and the genitals.

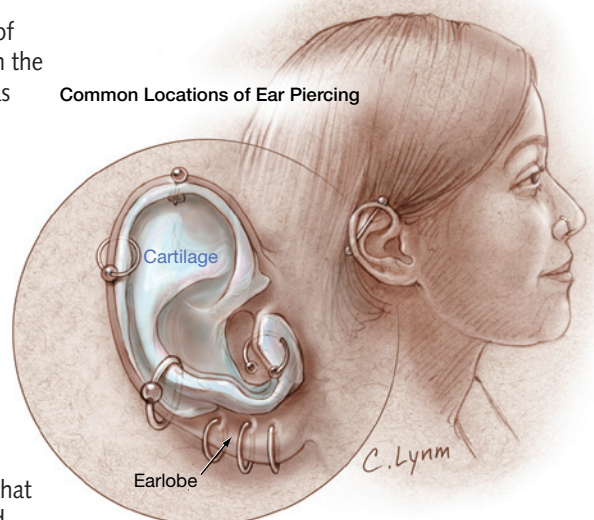
## INFECTION: A RISK OF BODY PIERCING

Any time the skin is penetrated, potential for infection exists. Typical signs of infection include pain, tenderness, redness, and foul-smelling drainage from the site of the piercing. Such infections can lead to serious complications such as abscess formation at the site or spread through the bloodstream to distant sites, including the heart valves. If you think you have an infection at a piercing site, see a doctor for evaluation.

Piercing through ear cartilage has more risk of infection than piercing the earlobe. This is because there is little blood flow to the cartilage. Ear cartilage infections are difficult to treat and may require surgery resulting in permanent disfigurement of the ear.

The instruments used to do body piercing may become contaminated with blood, body fluids, or other infectious materials. This may not be visible to the naked eye. Infections (such as hepatitis) can occur if the instruments are not properly cleaned and sterilized. If you choose to have a part of your body pierced, minimize your risk of infection by being certain that the piercing equipment has been sterilized. Piercing guns should be avoided.

Common Locations of Ear Piercing



## OTHER RISKS OF BODY PIERCING

- Poor healing
- Pain
- **Edema** (tissue swelling)
- Scar formation
- Allergic reactions to metal
- Dental damage from oral or tongue piercing

## QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU PIERCE

- What type of training does the piercer have?
- How are the piercing instruments cleaned and sterilized?
- How are problems at the specific piercing institution traced?
- What kind of care needs to be taken with the piercing?
- What type of metal (gold or silver are preferred) is used for the initial piercing?
- How long before the piercing is considered to be healed?
- Whom do you contact if problems arise with the piercing?
- Where do you find more information?

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Association of Professional Piercers  
888/888-1277  
[www.safepiercing.org](http://www.safepiercing.org)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish.

Sources: Association of Professional Piercers, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Janet M. Torpy, MD, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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