

BEAUTIFY VERSUS HORRIFY, ARTISTIC BODY PIERCINGS CAN BECOME NASTY

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Received: May 2024; Accepted: June 2024; Published: July 2024

Citation: Elghblawi E. Beautify versus horrify, artistic body piercings can become nasty Middle East Journal of Nursing 2024; 18(2): 63-64. DOI: 10.5742/MEJN2024.9378055

Background

Body piercing is described as the penetration of jewellery into openings created in unusual body areas, such as a fistula through the skin, the cartilage, or both, for desired decorative ornaments like jewels, plastic, wood plugs, beads, or pearls.

It has evolved from a behaviour where it was called a norm like an ear lobe piercing, to the extreme and multiple piercings. The motivations have changed and are associated with each individual's preferences and choices, which become trendier among young people. Some are called 'body modifications' or 'body art' to enhance a person's appearance, as creative long-term enjoyment expressions (14).

Many adopt the art of piercing for different places of the body, and see it as a sign of beauty, sexuality, and seduction, and ritual connections in certain tribal cultures. Many have gone far and pierced their sensitive areas, like the whole face, the tongue, the genitals, and the nipples. Over the years it spread out as a fashionable act in the West, along with tattooing (12).

It also ranges from innocuous as a fashion style to risk-laden as non-suicidal self-injury and self-inflicting pain(12).

Being a dermatologist, I have seen and read about some drawbacks and problems linked to the act. It's wise to consider hygienic conduct and any potential risks and consequences, like infections, metal allergies and skin irritations, embedded earrings, scarring, keloid formation, nerve destruction, and mechanical tissue tearing and damage. Besides the bleeding risk, contaminations with community-acquired methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, would prevent them from donating blood for a year or so. Also, auricular chondritis with pseudomonas aeruginosa(13) is a consideration.

Now piercing is linked to individuality. Body piercing, a growing trend especially in young people, is often linked to severe infections. Complications vary depending on the body-piercing site, materials used, the experience of the practitioner, hygiene regimens adopted, and aftercare by the recipient.

Viral routes of transmission can occur as well for viral hepatitis B, C, and HIV, as well as toxic shock syndrome(7). A distinct infection has been documented, such as sepsis, in various body organs including mastitis, endocarditis, and multiple brain abscesses, which could be detrimental and cause multiorgan failure including fulminant liver failure and death. Also, some important bacteria can be cultivated in such people, like Staphylococcus aureus, group A streptococci, and Pseudomonas aeruginosa(1-6). Also, there is a risk factor for colonization of Candida albicans(9).

Body sensitivities like allergic contact dermatitis (nickel and latex), have been reported as well.

Not only that, those piercings can be associated with certain negative social behaviours like gang affiliations, drug users, and school absenteeism(10).

Oral piercing of the lips can be associated with gum inflammation and recession, teeth chips, cracks, and fractures due to continuous trauma. Tongue piercing can lead to swelling, pain, and difficulty in speaking and eating along with excessive salivation, and might extend to excessive bleeding, as well as an irritation to the palate above it.

Nasal piercing might be aspirated, embedded with time, and require surgical extraction(2-3).

Navel, nipple, and ear piercing can lead to skin tearing, and thus surgical correction and scars. Also, galactorrhoea has been reported following nipple piercing due to continuous stimulation.

Genital piercing, of the penis, the vulva, and the clitoris can lead to swelling, persistent pain, bleeding, and infection with scarring, as well as infertility due to secondary infection and obstruction due to scarring(8). Also, a newly created tract (fistula) can lead to leakage of semen and urine. Priapism has also been observed and rarely, squamous cell carcinoma of the penis can occur consequently due to the continuous friction of the pierced skin(10).

Many studies have reported that body piercing is a marker for high-risk behaviour, psychopathologic symptoms, and antisocial personality traits.

Anyone considering body piercing should complete a medical and social history by the conductor to identify conditions that might predispose to complications in those who are considering piercing(10).

Although the piercing might sound safe, proper hygiene and potential risks should be appreciated to avoid unfavourable consequences.

This highlights the importance of educating patients about the potentially dangerous and even life-threatening infectious complications of piercing and stimulates further discussion on the possibility of antibiotic prophylaxis of such procedures. Also, educational campaigns should be promoted to disseminate knowledge on health risks related to piercings. Most of the piercers are unlicensed, and unregulated individuals who lack knowledge of the risks and complications incurred with such an act(11).

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