

The Hole Truth About Body Piercing

Get the facts before you make the mark

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Ashley Lawton and her friend bought a used ear-piercing gun on eBay in high school. When the gun arrived, Lawton and her friend marked each other's ears, then pulled the trigger. Lawton, a psychology major, says it was fun at the time, but looking back, she acknowledges some dangers. "It could've gotten infected and we wouldn't have known what to do," Lawton says. When she recently decided to pierce her septum, Lawton opted for a reputable studio.

Many students, like Lawton, make a spontaneous decision

to get pierced without doing much research or considering the consequences.

"It's not as easy as putting in jewelry and taking it out," says Dr. Amy Derick, a dermatologist who helped conduct the 2006 study "Tattoos and Body Piercings in the United States." She found that one-third of people with body piercings develop complications. While a bellybutton ring might be appealing, there's plenty to consider before facing the needle.

DO REMEMBER FOREVER IS A LONG TIME

Some people's bodies heal quickly when they remove their jewelry, but others may have a permanent mark. "People view body piercing as a temporary thing, but it's not," Derick says.

Scarring is the most common body piercing issue at Derick's practice, especially with navel piercing, which can develop pink, fleshy, pimple-like scars. Creams and lotions might reduce a scar's appearance, but often only surgery — usually not covered by insurance companies — gives the desired result.

Laser scar removal uses high-energy light to remove or reshape scars. The procedure varies depending on scar type, but is typically a day surgery and patients resume normal activity in a week. Thick or keloid scars might require treatment every two months. Some opt for steroid injections to minimize protruding scars, or fat or collagen injections to raise soft, indented scars.

DO

Make sure the piercing studio is spic-and-span

The Association of Professional Piercers recommends asking to see the studio's autoclave, a metal machine resembling a pressure cooker that sterilizes tools and equipment through steam and pressure. Ask to see the studio's spore test results, which confirm that the autoclave functions properly. To perform the tests, the studio places test strips in the autoclave while it's in use, then sends them to a lab for analysis.

Before getting pierced, watch the piercer wash his or her hands and put on clean gloves. All needles should come from individual, unopened, sterile packages and be disposed of in sharps containers, which are often bright red.

DO

Give your new piercing some TLC

Proper piercing aftercare can greatly reduce your chances of infection, says Derick. Wash your hands before touching your piercing. Clean your piercing with a sea salt solution once a day and mild soap once or twice per day. Pat it dry with a clean towel.

See a doctor at the first sign of trouble. Derick warns that the longer you wait, the more serious a problem can become. Mild tenderness, swelling or itchiness is normal during the healing process. But, if you notice severe redness, swelling, or pain, have a lot of thick, smelly, yellow, green or gray discharge, or have red streaks around the piercing site, you should consult a doctor, according to the Association of Professional Piercers.

DON'T Think all piercing studios are the same

Since no regulations exist for body piercing studios in Onondaga County, the health department only becomes involved if an incident somehow crosses over into pre-existing public health laws, according to Gary Sauda, director of environmental health for the county.

New York State is working to pass regulations for the body piercing industry, but Sauda says it's impossible to predict when new legislation will take effect.

"You really need to take it in your own hands to do your own research," says John Joyce, owner of Scarab Body Arts in Armory Square. Joyce says there are some weeks where he spends more time fixing tattoos or piercings from other studios than doing his own work.

DON'T Fall for the fads

Joyce stresses that not every piercing is right for everybody. If you want the "industrial," a bar that stretches across the top of your ear, you need a well-defined ridge in the front and back of your ear, he says. Otherwise, the piercing won't heal and may tear.

Watch out for piercers who don't tell you when a piercing won't work on your body. Find a piercer who can help you make the right decisions for your body by asking about his or her background and looking at his or her portfolio. Joyce says a piercer should help you choose piercings that complement your features.

DON'T Think a pre-existing disease won't affect your piercing

Individuals with autoimmune disorders or those who are prone to bacterial problems, such as Chron's disease, may also want to think twice before getting pierced because they may have more problems with their piercings healing, Derick says. Autoimmune disorders mean the body is attacking itself, so it's difficult to know how it will react to a new piercing. If you are taking drugs to suppress your immune system, you may get an infection more easily. **with**