

Body piercing

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BODY PIERCING is a form of body modification. It is one of the oldest and most interesting forms of adornment or body modification. The reasons for piercing the body are as diverse as the cultures they come from.

The Centurions of ancient Rome expressed their strength and virility by displaying pierced, jewelled nipples. Nose piercing has been common in India since the 16th century. In Borneo, a man could choose to have pierced genitals as part of courtship rituals to enhance sexual performance. Ethiopian men and women have various facial piercings, and oversized ear discs identify some. A young Sioux male, on his journey to manhood, would have his chest pierced with eagle claws and then be hung suspended in the air, enduring the pain of this rite of passage.

Tongue piercing was popular with the Aztec and Mayan elites, although it was carried out as part of a blood ritual and such piercings were not intended to be permanent. Ancient Mesoamericans wore jewellery in their ears, noses, and lower lips. In some parts of Australia and New Guinea, one tribal custom is a pierced septum, giving the warrior a fierce and savage appearance.

Body piercing has, from the beginning, been used as a form of personal expression, as religious ritual, for cultural reasons, as a royal distinction, or more often now, as a fashion trend. It was all but forgotten in Europe during the early 1900s, until it was revived by London's fashion gurus and artists of the 1970s.

In our Western culture, we have brought to the mainstream some of these ancient and tribal practices, as well as creating our own neo-tribal customs. Modern individuals can pierce their body for any number of reasons, but they are not limited or obligated to a specific set of rules or conduct. Piercing has grown in popularity during the past 5 years, especially among teenagers, who pierce just about anything that can be pierced — ears, noses, tongues, and navels. Another unique principle behind modern piercing is that, unless the pierced tissue has been overstretched, it can be viewed as temporary. The person can take out the jewellery if they desire and transform their “look” again and again.

Modern attitudes to piercing

Body piercing has become more accepted in the West and in other parts of the world. For example, while ear piercing was long uncommon among middle and upper class Western men, today men with pierced ears can be seen working in banks and other traditionally conservative settings. In other parts of the world, ear piercing is still considered inappropriate for men in many settings, as are multiple ear piercings on women.



Some regard the practice of piercing or of being pierced as a spiritual affair, sometimes embracing the term “modern primitive”, while others consider body modification to be a sign of non-conformity and deride this approach as insulting, as cultural appropriation, or as faddish. Some see the practice as a form of artistic self-expression, while others choose to be pierced as a form of sexual expression. For others, piercing is part of a masochistic lifestyle or relationship, or is incorporated into sadism and masochism play.

Some people choose to be pierced for symbolic reasons. Survivors of sexual abuse have said that they experience piercing to allow them to retake control over their own bodies. Some people choose to be pierced to symbolise certain relationships. For gay men, piercing has historically been viewed as a form of public self-identification or “coming out”. However, the current popularity of piercing among many different groups has diluted much of its specific cultural identification and symbolism. This can at times lead to prejudice or cognitive bias against those with piercings or visible signs of past piercings.

Contemporary piercing procedure

Creating an opening in the body using a sharp object through the area to be pierced creates permanent body piercing (as opposed to play piercing). This can be done either by cutting an opening using a needle (usually a hollow medical needle) or scalpel, or by removing tissue, either with a scalpel or a dermal punch. Non-professional body piercers in retail settings perform ear piercings using piercing guns. These gun-shaped devices force a blunt stud through flesh via mechanical means, causing much greater trauma to the body than any other piercing method. They are often used by

untrained personnel and, as they cannot be properly sterilised, they place both the operator and the client at much greater risk for infection and the transmission of bloodborne pathogens than any of the methods used by professional body piercers.

Professional body piercing studios generally take precautions to protect the health of the person being pierced and the piercer. Tools and jewellery are sterilised in autoclaves and non-autoclavable surfaces are cleaned with sterilising agents on a regular basis and between piercing sessions. Sterile, single use gloves are worn by the piercer to protect both the operator and the client.

If body piercing is done poorly, unhygienically or incorrectly, potential side effects include:

- cauliflower ears because of cartilage infection;
- septicaemia;
- scar tissue on breasts or genitals;
- weeping wounds;
- hepatitis B and C; and
- HIV/AIDS.

Australian Defence Force policy

Body piercing is generally discouraged by the Australian Defence Force. Navy policy states that wearing of body

piercing jewellery in non-exposed body parts creates a risk of unnecessary injury with snagging hazards and transmission of heat in a fire. As it increases risk to the individual, it becomes a breach of the occupational health and safety duty.

Navy personnel may only wear body piercing jewellery in non-exposed parts of the body when not on duty in shore establishments, and when posted to ships when proceeding directly to or from shore leave.

Army members are not permitted to wear any form of body piercing adornment when on duty or on Defence establishments while off duty. However, female personnel may wear a single plain stud in each earlobe when on duty, and may wear a single earring in each earlobe when on Defence establishments off duty.

Similar rules apply in the Air Force.

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