PROCEDURE

Piercings

A piercing creates an opening in skin or tissue so jewellery can be worn

PURPOSE
To create an opening for wearing jewellery

PROCEDURE TYPE
Neither diagnostic nor therapeutic; minimally invasive cosmetic needle procedure

WHERE IT IS DONE
Licensed professional piercing studio

ANAESTHESIA
None; the needle pass usually lasts seconds

HOW LONG IT TAKES
About 5 to 30 minutes per piercing

PREPARATION
Eat beforehand; review medicines, allergies, and healing conditions

RECOVERY
Same day; drive only if alert and not light-headed

MAIN RISKS
Infection, bleeding, allergic reaction, scarring, dental injury

RESULTS
Jewellery placement is immediate; healing takes weeks to months

Overview

A body piercing creates a small channel through skin, cartilage, or other tissue. Jewellery is placed in the channel while it heals. Common sites include the earlobe, ear cartilage, nose, eyebrow, lip, tongue, navel, nipple, and genitals.

Most piercings are made with a sterile, single-use hollow needle. The initial jewellery is chosen to leave room for swelling. A surface or "dermal" piercing uses an anchor placed partly under the skin.

Piercing is usually a cosmetic procedure rather than medical treatment. The way it is performed and cared for affects the risk of infection, scarring, and poor healing.

Why the procedure is performed

People usually choose piercings for personal style, cultural or religious traditions, identity, or self-expression. Some people use jewellery to mark an important event.

The location affects both appearance and practical concerns. For example, tongue and lip jewellery may damage teeth or gums. Ear cartilage has a more limited blood supply than the earlobe, so infection there can be more difficult to treat. Navel and surface piercings are more likely to catch on clothing or move toward the skin's surface.

A piercing should be your informed choice. You should understand the expected healing process, aftercare, risks, and alternatives before agreeing.

Who should and should not have it

Piercing may be reasonable if you can provide informed consent, follow aftercare instructions, and access help if problems develop. Local age and consent laws may limit piercings for children and teenagers.

An elective piercing may need to be avoided or delayed if you have:

These are not all absolute reasons against piercing. They may change the safest timing, location, or jewellery. Do not stop a blood thinner or any prescribed medicine on your own.

Oral piercing may not be appropriate if jewellery would worsen existing tooth or gum problems. A dentist can explain those site-specific risks.

- An infection, rash, sunburn, or broken skin at the planned site
- Poorly controlled diabetes or another condition that slows healing
- A weakened immune system from illness or treatment
- A bleeding disorder or medicine that increases bleeding
- A history of raised scars called keloids
- A known allergy to metals used in jewellery
- Anatomy that cannot safely support the planned jewellery
- Pregnancy, especially for navel, nipple, or genital piercing

How to prepare

Choose an experienced piercer who follows local licensing and infection-control rules. The

studio should be clean and have a private area for the procedure. The piercer should wash their hands, wear new gloves, open sterile equipment in front of you, and place used needles in a sharps container.

Ask whether reusable equipment is sterilized in an autoclave, a machine that uses pressurized steam. A sterile, single-use needle causes a controlled opening. Reusable piercing guns may be difficult to sterilize fully and can cause more tissue trauma, especially in cartilage.

Tell the piercer about allergies, medical conditions, previous keloids, and medicines or supplements that affect bleeding. Ask what material the first jewellery contains. Implant-grade titanium, suitable grades of steel, niobium, and certain solid gold products may be options, depending on the site and any metal sensitivity.

Eat and drink normally unless you have been told otherwise. A meal beforehand may reduce light-headedness. Avoid alcohol or recreational drugs before the appointment because they can affect consent, bleeding, and safe decision-making.

Wear clean, loose clothing that allows access to the site. Follow the treating facility's own instructions if they differ, because its instructions take priority.

What happens during the procedure

The piercer first checks the area and discusses jewellery size and placement. They clean the skin and usually mark the planned entry and exit points so you can review them.

You will sit or lie in a stable position. The piercer passes a sterile hollow needle through the tissue and guides the jewellery into the new channel. The needle is then placed in a sharps container. The jewellery should not be forced into tissue that is too tight.

You may feel a brief sharp pain, pressure, warmth, or a pinching sensation. A small amount of bleeding can occur. Swelling is expected, especially with oral and cartilage piercings.

The piercer should explain cleaning, expected healing, and when jewellery may need professional adjustment. You should receive written aftercare information.

Recovery and what to expect afterward

Pain is usually strongest during the needle pass. Mild soreness, tenderness, swelling, or bruising can continue afterward. A small amount of pale fluid may dry into a crust around the jewellery; this is not automatically a sign of infection.

You can usually eat normally. With a tongue or lip piercing, cool soft foods may feel more

comfortable at first. Take care when chewing, and avoid playing with oral jewellery against your teeth.

Normal light activity can usually resume the same day. Protect the piercing from friction, tight clothing, cosmetics, unclean water, and contact sports. Do not twist or rotate the jewellery unless your piercer gives a specific reason.

You can usually drive home if you are alert and not light-headed. Piercing normally does not involve sedation. If you feel faint, sit or lie down and arrange another way home.

Most people can return to work or school the same day. You may need adjustments if your job involves helmets, tight uniforms, dirt, water exposure, or physical contact.

Wash your hands before touching the area. Use the recommended sterile saline rinse or other site-specific care. Avoid harsh products such as hydrogen peroxide or rubbing alcohol unless a healthcare professional directs their use. Do not change the jewellery before the channel is fully healed.

Risks and possible complications

Possible problems include:

Cartilage infection needs prompt assessment because it can damage the shape of the ear. Tongue swelling can interfere with swallowing and, in severe cases, breathing.

Even a well-performed piercing can migrate toward the surface or fail to heal. Surface and dermal piercings are particularly prone to rejection.

- Skin or deeper tissue infection
- Bleeding or a collection of blood under the skin
- An allergic reaction, often related to nickel
- Thickened or raised scarring, including keloids
- Jewellery becoming embedded, displaced, or rejected
- Tearing after jewellery catches on clothing or equipment
- Nerve or blood vessel injury
- Blood-borne infection if equipment is contaminated
- Tooth chips, gum damage, or swallowing jewellery from oral piercings

Results and follow up

You will see the jewellery's position immediately, although early swelling can change how it looks. The final appearance becomes clearer as swelling settles and the channel matures.

Healing may take weeks to months. Timing differs by body site, jewellery fit, health, and aftercare. The outside can appear healed before the deeper channel is strong.

Routine medical follow-up is not usually required. Your piercer may recommend a planned visit to shorten, or "downsize," the initial jewellery after swelling decreases. This can reduce movement and snagging. Have jewellery changes performed professionally until healing is complete.

If you think the piercing is infected, leave the jewellery in place unless a healthcare professional tells you to remove it. Removing it too early may allow the opening to close while infection remains underneath.

Alternatives

Not having a piercing avoids the wound, healing period, and piercing-related complications. It also means you cannot wear jewellery that requires a permanent channel.

For decorative effects without a needle, alternatives include:

If your goal is cultural or symbolic, a temporary item or non-piercing ceremony may be an option. These choices avoid a healing wound but do not provide the same permanent placement.

- Clip-on earrings or ear cuffs, which are removable but may pinch
- Magnetic jewellery, which avoids piercing but can detach or be swallowed
- Adhesive gems, which are temporary and may irritate sensitive skin
- False nose, lip, or septum rings, which may look less secure
- Chains or other wearable jewellery, which do not copy every placement

When to call your healthcare team

Arrange prompt medical assessment for increasing pain, warmth, swelling, or redness; thick yellow or green drainage; fever; red streaks; or jewellery becoming embedded. Ear cartilage that becomes very painful, swollen, or misshapen also needs prompt attention.

Contact a dentist for a chipped tooth, ongoing gum irritation, or oral jewellery that repeatedly

strikes your teeth. Ask for routine advice if irritation is not settling, the jewellery is moving toward the surface, or you are unsure whether healing is progressing normally.

Seek emergency help for trouble breathing, rapidly increasing tongue or throat swelling, fainting that does not improve, uncontrolled bleeding, or signs of a severe allergic reaction such as widespread hives with facial swelling.

Common questions

Will I be asleep?

No. Body piercing is normally performed while you are awake without sedation. The needle pass usually takes only a few seconds.

Can I drive home?

Usually, yes. Drive only if you feel fully alert and steady. Wait or arrange a ride if you feel faint, shaky, or unwell.

How painful is a piercing?

Most people feel a brief sharp pinch followed by pressure or soreness. Pain differs by site and personal sensitivity. Cartilage and thicker tissue may feel more uncomfortable than an earlobe.

When will I know how it looks?

You will see the placement immediately. Swelling may make it look uneven or tight at first, so the settled appearance takes longer to judge.

When can I change the jewellery?

Wait until the channel has healed and your piercer confirms it is ready. Changing jewellery too early can injure the channel or introduce infection.

Can I swim after a piercing?

It is safest to avoid submerging a new piercing in pools, hot tubs, lakes, or seawater during early healing. These settings can expose the wound to germs and irritating chemicals.

Sources

- NHS. Body piercing
- Mayo Clinic. Piercings: How to prevent complications
- American Dental Association. Oral Piercing and Jewelry



- Association of Professional Piercers. Aftercare
- Association of Professional Piercers. Picking Your Piercer
- Breuner CC, Levine DA, and the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Adolescence. "Adolescent and Young Adult Tattooing, Piercing, and Scarification." Pediatrics . 2017;140(4):e20163494.