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hole truth

There's a price to pay for getting pierced. By Melissa Liebling-Goldberg. Photographed by Ben Hassett.

Ashley was intrigued when she saw her friend with "this thing bobbing around in her mouth." It wasn't long before she followed her classmate's example and got two piercings: a tongue ring and a navel ring. "With glow-in-the-dark balls, your tongue can glow in a club!" she explains. But after swallowing the ball on her tongue ring and developing an infection around her navel ring (it kept getting caught on her jeans), she realized that "piercings were more hassle than they were worth."

Nowadays, it's not just club-hoppers like the Toronto-based Ashley (now 23) getting pierced. Stella, *seventeen, a Los Angeles native, sees her piercings as "another fashion accessory" and has amassed nine. Jamie, * an eighteen-year-old, has eleven piercings so far, and doesn't consider them to be "a big deal." Plenty of other teens seem to feel the same way: A recent Mayo Clinic study done at Pace University in Pleasantville, New York, found that 60 percent of the female college students who participated had body or facial piercings (other than the standard earlobes).

But while they may seem cool, piercing comes with significant risks. Gerald Imber, M.D., a New York City-based plastic surgeon, regularly sees disfigurements from it. "Patients come in with ripped earlobes from earrings being torn out," he says. "If a tongue ring gets ripped out, it's a bloodbath." Jamie's run-in with her piercings was

similarly painful: "My navel ring got caught on the buttonholes on the bottom of my shirt. Then, the same thing happened with my eyebrow ring. But no regrets—they're not like tattoos, which you can't take back."

Unfortunately for Jamie, the evidence differs. "An allergic reaction can cause skin to pick up the stud's color, leaving a permanent black ring around the piercing like a tattoo," notes Imber. Piercing also becomes irreversible if scars develop or holes don't close up (which is common with eyebrow rings). While lobes heal in about a month, cartilage can take up to a year and is prone to infections. As Robert Guida, M.D., a New York City-based plastic surgeon, explains, "Over the last ten years, the incidence of auricular perichondritis [an infection of the skin, soft tissue, and cartilage] from piercing has doubled. This can result in 'cauliflower ear,' where the ear loses its shape and is permanently deformed."

If you're serious about getting pierced and have your parents' blessing (most states mandate parental consent if you're under eighteen or 21), go to someone approved by the Association of Professional Piercers, which has rigorous requirements for membership. Daniel Hindle, a seventeen-year-old teen from England, died after receiving a lip piercing. The suspected cause? Blood poisoning, from an infection due to piercing. Think twice, cautions Roy Geronemus, M.D., a dermasurgeon in New York City: "It's unnecessary to risk deforming yourself when there are other ways to express your personality, like through clothing. Most people get sick of their piercings by college anyway. Is it really worth it?" □
**Name has been changed.*





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