

Body Decorating and the Risks

Do you wear a permanent tattoo? A navel ring? An earring? A nose ring? If your answer to all of these questions is no but you are thinking of getting one of these adornments, then here is one more question for you to ponder: How much are you willing to pay for this look? Note, by the way, that that's "pay," not as in money, but "pay" as in health.

A growing number of individuals, who never considered that last question, are paying serious consequences. Some have paid with their lives.

Custom of the Country

Did you ever wonder where the practice of "body modification" got its start? From a global perspective, it is nothing new. Among indigenous tribes, this practice dates back thousands of years. In ancient Egypt, having a pierced navel was a sign that you were royalty. Polynesian tribal chiefs in the South Pacific stood apart from their subjects by tattoos—and not just one or two on their arm. They were decorated from head to toe in elaborate patterns that told of their high rank and status in the community.

In modern times these forms of self-expression are in their infancy in popular culture. Recently, the body piercing and tattooing trades have become a big business. Ear lobes, eyebrows, lips, nose, and tongue—all are at risk from the piercer's or tattooer's needle.

Proceed at Your Own Risk

Now that body piercing and tattooing have become so common, health professionals have begun dispensing words of caution. The risks, they are telling us, are great.

Some risks apply no matter what area is pierced. This is because piercing and tattooing both involve the inserting of needles into the skin. This process raises the risk of infection with serious blood-borne diseases. Among these are Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, tetanus and HIV. Other problems that can arise include skin cysts, scars, and other disfigurements.

Other risks are related to specific body parts. The tongue and lips contain thousands of mouth bacteria; the tongue, moreover, is exposed to constant friction that occurs when you speak or eat. These factors make the tongue and lips both high-risk areas for infection.

The eyebrow is even riskier. This seemingly innocent clump of hair is a breeding ground for skin and hair bacteria, and has a rich blood supply that connects to the eye. An infection of the eyebrow can spread to the area around the eye, causing blindness. Infection can even spread to the brain.

If after reading this, you still plan to have a piercing or permanent tattoo, then select a professional studio where safety precautions are taken. Such establishments sterilize their needles in much the way a doctor does, thereby lowering the risk of infection.

A Last Word to the Wise

Before you go, however, do one last thing: Find pictures of parents or other adult family members when they were your age. Notice their clothes, their hairstyles, and other fashion adornments.

Do these fashions look funny and ridiculous to you today? If they do, try to project how *you're* going to look in the eyes of others 20 or 30 years from now. If these fashion statements don't appear silly, then take a cue from them. You may be the next trendsetter by making what is old new.