

Metal jewelry more likely to cause infection with tongue piercing

January 4 2011, By Carl Sherman

A stud or ring in their tongue might be an essential fashion accessory for many young adults, but piercing comes at the cost of medical risks, including infection.

The material that tongue jewelry is made of might make a difference, according to a study in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#), which suggests that stainless steel studs are far more welcoming to [bacteria](#) than those composed of plastics like Teflon.

In particular, the germs that cause [staph infections](#) can cover metal, but not plastic, studs, the researchers found.

“Consumers should avoid stainless steel and titanium studs in favor of polytetrafluorethylene or polypropylene, not only because of bacteria and a potentially higher risk of local infection of the piercing channel, but also because of the risk of tooth chipping and gum recession,” said lead author Ines Kapferer, M.D., of Innsbruck Medical University, in Austria.

She and her colleagues replaced the tongue piercings of 68 women and 12 men, whose average age was about 23, with sterile studs of four different materials: stainless steel, titanium and two forms of plastic.

When they removed and examined the studs two weeks later, the researchers found significantly higher concentrations of bacteria on steel piercings than on those made with the synthetic materials. Among the

germs found more abundantly on metal studs were staphylococcus, streptococcus and pseudomonas — all commonly associated with oral and body-wide infections.

The researchers speculated that a “biofilm” of [germs](#) sticks more readily to stainless steel than to plastic.

Infections and other complications in people with pierced tongues are not uncommon, said Chicago periodontist Robert Pick, D.D.S., a clinical associate professor of surgery at Northwestern University and spokesperson for the American Dental Association.

“Not a month goes by that I don’t see a tongue piercing that I have to take out because of an infection that’s off the charts, or because it has stripped the gum away from behind the lower front teeth,” Pick said.

Normally, skin fills in to line the piercing channel, but if it doesn’t, “there’s an opening down into the muscle and deeper parts of the tongue,” Pick said, “It’s just a cesspool for bacteria.”

Serious infections — he sees an average of two per month — can develop within weeks of piercing, or years later, he said.

More information: Kapferer I, Beier US, Persson RG. Tongue piercing: the impact of material on microbiological findings. *J Adol Health* online, 2011.

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