



Popular piercings need careful cleaning

Despite rise in popularity, literature on caring for piercings is scarce

Dr. Rod Steele, a local family physician, is in the pharmacy picking up some supplies for his family, and the two of you strike up a conversation. He starts to talk to you about a couple of patients he saw in the office this last week, so you go into the private counselling area of the pharmacy. Dr. Steele says he can't

believe the number of patients he's been seeing who have done some type of body modification or piercing.

When he graduated from medical school 15 years ago, it was viewed as risqué for a woman to have more than one earring per ear. Lately, he has seen piercings in almost every body part, includ-



COUNSELLING CHALLENGE

by Michael Boivin

ing the tongue, navel, nipples and genitalia. He has tried to keep an open mind regarding this form of self-expression but has a difficult time hiding his disapproval.

The problem is, patients are

coming to him with grossly infected sites or are asking him how to properly clean and maintain their piercings. He doesn't recall this topic being discussed in medical school, nor by any continuing education program that he's seen. He placed a call to the local drug information service, which informed him that the published medical literature on this topic is poor.

Dr. Steele asks what suggestions or recommendations he can provide his patients who decide to pierce different parts of their body. He also wonders if you have any information regarding the relation between body piercing



and other problems, or any information on all the different types of piercings, so he will be able to provide more educated opinions to his patients.

What would you recommend?

RESEARCH NOTES

Cinnamon for type 2 diabetes

A new study has found that just half a teaspoon of cinnamon a day reduces blood sugar levels in people with type 2 diabetes. A team from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Human Nutrition Research Centre was looking at the effects of common foods on blood sugar, one of which was apple pie. They expected the pie to cause a spike in blood sugar levels, but the opposite occurred. Building on this finding, the researchers organized a study in which volunteers with type 2 diabetes were given one, three or six grams of cinnamon powder a day, in capsules after meals. Blood sugar levels dropped an average of 20% among the study participants and returned to previous levels once they stopped taking the spice. The researchers found that even something as simple as soaking a cinnamon stick in tea had a lowering effect on blood sugar levels.

SOURCE: *Diabetes Care*, January 2003, Volume 26.



Asthmatics unaware of latest treatments

Many people with mild to moderate asthma don't know when to discuss medication changes with their doctor and aren't aware of current treatment guidelines for the condition. A survey commissioned by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology found that more than half of respondents were unaware that once their asthma seemed under control, they should discuss with their doctor whether their treatment should be leveled off or stepped up. Of the 2,000 adults and 309 caregivers questioned as part of the survey, only 42% said their doctor talked to them about the advantages and drawbacks of various asthma drugs. More than 70% said they didn't know about national asthma treatment guidelines, which outline the types of medications used to keep asthma under control and treat flare-ups of the disease.

SOURCE: *The Medical Post*, September 28, 2004, Volume 40, Issue 36.

CASE WORKUP

Body piercing and other types of body modification, once considered extreme and alternative practices, are now becoming more mainstream. Most healthcare professionals have little if any training on how to care for these piercings, or the potential health consequences. The key for all healthcare professionals is to remember that people most often use these simply as a method of self-expression. It should never be assumed that body modification is indicative of deviant behaviour.

There has been very little research done on how to care for and maintain the different piercing types. Most of the medical literature focuses on the complications of these different piercings and how a patient with these piercings is at higher risk of problems. One research study showed that patients with piercings and tattoos were more likely to demonstrate risk-taking behaviour. These high-risk behaviours included sexual activity at an earlier age and drug use. They were also more likely to experience eating disorders and depression, and even to attempt suicide.

Another concern is that the jewelry can conduct electricity; which can be an issue in an emergency room or operating room, where this electrical conduction can lead to burns on the body.

The areas that are commonly pierced include the earlobe, ear cartilage, eyebrow, nose, tongue, lips, nipples, navel, and different parts of both female and male genitalia.

MEDICAL LITERATURE SCARCE

Most of the existing information on piercings is not medical literature. Almost all information found on the subject comes from piercing associations. Therefore, the recommendations given are not based on scientific data, but rather on the experience these groups have gathered through performing a large number of piercings.

Standard care after a body piercing involves cleaning around the openings with a mild antibacterial soap, usually once to twice daily during the healing phase. Strong cleansers are not recommended as they tend to dry the area. Many groups recommend the use of Dial to cleanse the area, while other piercing groups recommend mild cleansers such as Spectro Jel or Cetaphil. The patient is advised to wash the piercing daily with soap in the shower, moving the piercing back and forth while washing so that the soap/cleanser and water can penetrate the opening. This is then to be rinsed well with warm water to help remove any crusting that may develop. Piercing groups also recommend perform-

ing salt water rinses for about one minute once daily to help improve comfort level. To make these rinses, patients dissolve 1/2 tsp of sea salt (not table salt) in water. Rinsing should continue during the entire healing process. The healing time will vary based on the site pierced and the individual patient.

For oral piercings, the care is slightly different. Piercing associations recommend using a 50/50 mixture of Biotene and water. This is swirled around the mouth for 30 to 60 seconds after each meal. It's recommended that salt water rinses be done throughout the entire healing process,



Piercings aren't a sign of deviance

between meals and whenever anything besides water is consumed.

The most common complications are infections at the site of the piercing. For the most part, maintaining a hygienic site with proper cleaning can dramatically reduce the risk of infection.

Patients are encouraged to cleanse the area properly and monitor for signs of infection.

CARE PLAN

Dr. Steele is expressing some concerns about piercing that are common among his colleagues. Most physicians are not adequately trained on how to deal with this type of self-expression. By providing this physician with some general care recommendations, we may help him better counsel his patients who ask how to care for pierced sites. We should also let him know of the study that demonstrated patients with piercings and tattoos were

more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour, so he can counsel his patients accordingly. Lastly, if he does not feel comfortable counselling these patients about piercing care, he should be reassured that patients can be referred to the pharmacy for proper care instructions. ❁

Special thanks to Susan Halasi at the Ontario Pharmacists' Association Drug Information and Research Centre, Toronto, for help in researching this article.

Michael Boivin, B.Sc.Pharm., is a community pharmacist and consultant in Barrie, Ontario.