

Skin penetration procedures

Client information for ear piercing, body piercing and other skin penetration processes

Key advice

- Choose an experienced practitioner whose premises (shop) is registered with their local council.
- Only sterilised needles, instruments and equipment should be used.
- Care for your piercing or wound while the area heals. Only handle the area when necessary and always wash your hands before doing so. Keep the area clean, dry and protected.
- If you experience pain, swelling, redness or discharge seek medical advice immediately.

Any activity where the skin is pierced or penetrated is classified as skin penetration. In the past these procedures were mostly limited to ear, body or oral piercings, but more recent practices include activities such as beading, branding and scarification. It also includes, but is not limited to, practices such as dry needling, wet cupping, feathering and micro-needling.

If you are thinking about having a skin penetration procedure you should read this fact sheet to find out about the law, the risks, and aftercare.

The law in Victoria

Laws relating to skin penetration and body piercing are different in each state or territory. In Victoria it is illegal for any person to perform scarification, tongue splitting, branding or beading on any person under the age of 18 years.

It is also illegal for a body piercer to perform an intimate body piercing on a person under the age of 18 years, whether or not consent has been given. Intimate body piercing includes piercing of your genitals, anal region, perineum (between anus and genitals) or nipples.

In Victoria, it is also illegal for a body piercer to perform any body piercing on you if you are under 16 years of age, without obtaining written consent from:

- your parent or guardian, **and**
- yourself, if you are over 10 years of age and have the capacity to consent.

Go to a registered premises

Skin penetration businesses must be registered with their local council¹. A certificate of registration should be available for you to see. To comply with health legislation:

- the premises must be kept clean and hygienic
- instruments, needles and jewellery must be sterile at the time of use; the piercer should be able to explain how they have been sterilised
- the practitioner should not have exposed cuts or wounds and their clothes must be clean
- the premises must have accessible handwashing facilities
- the proprietor of the premises must provide you with health information before any procedure is done
- the proprietor of the premises must keep a record of your name, address and telephone number for a period of 12 months after the skin penetration procedure.

Risks

Poor hygiene and lack of care during or after the skin penetration procedure can lead to infection, allergic reactions, nerve damage or transmission of serious infectious diseases.

Complications from any procedure may include:

- infection or an abscess at the site of the piercing
- bloodstream infection, if an infection of a wound/piercing isn't treated early

¹ There are some limited exemptions such as the practice of a person registered under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law to practise in the pharmacy profession (other than as a student).

- problems with healing or scarring (for example, keloid scarring)
- excessive bleeding – this requires prompt medical attention
- rejection and migration – this is more likely if a piercing is not in the right place or the jewellery is made from the wrong metal or is the wrong size
- blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV from non-sterilised equipment.

Signs of infection include pain, redness, swelling and thick discharge (yellow or green) from the piercing site.

See your doctor immediately if you have any of these signs. Do not remove the jewellery until you seek further advice.

Some complications can happen with particular piercing sites or procedures. These can include:

- **Oral/facial piercing**
 - Aspiration (choking) is a risk if the ball unscrews from the bar bell and rolls down your throat into your windpipe. The ball can lodge in your lungs. **This is a medical emergency: Call an ambulance on 000.**
 - Difficulty speaking or chewing, mouth irritation or damage to teeth and gums, nerve damage, difficulty breathing due to swelling caused by an infection.
- **Navel piercing** – severe infection if the umbilicus (belly button) is pierced.
- **Nipple piercing** – difficulty breastfeeding, an infected nipple (in women the infection can travel through the milk ducts and into the lymph nodes under the arm) or the growth of a cyst inside the nipple.
- **Genital piercing** – increased risk of sexually transmissible infections due to condom damage and because infection can enter the body at the piercing.
- **Lost stud/retainer** – a stud or retainer can travel under the skin or the gum. If you lose a stud or retainer, seek urgent medical attention.
- **Migration of micro-dermal implant**

Some people are at a higher risk of infection or complications due to medications, chemotherapy, weakened immune system, breast implants, heart valve diseases, rheumatic fever, and skin infections. For further advice about these risks consult your doctor before having a piercing or other skin penetration procedure.

What to look for

When performing a skin penetration procedure, the practitioner should:

- perform hand hygiene at the beginning and end of the procedure and whenever they take a break during the procedure such as when answering the phone

- clean and disinfect your skin thoroughly before and after the procedure
- use single-use disposable needles for each procedure
- use sterile equipment – the piercer should be able to explain how equipment is sterilised
- use only new sterilised jewellery for piercings.

Aftercare

The practitioner should provide you with information about how to care for your wound/piercing after a skin penetration procedure. Some procedures, such as dry needling need little or no aftercare due to the very small risk of infection they pose.

How long your piercing or wound takes to heal depends on where it is, the technique used, the size of the wound, the quality of the jewellery, how you look after it and your body's own ability to heal. Healing time can vary from around two weeks to six or nine months.

Only handle the wound/piercing when necessary and always wash your hands before touching it. Use only fresh disposable paper towel to dry the wound/piercing after a shower or bath. Never use a communal hand/bath towel.

Remember to see your doctor if there are any problems with an area that is pierced that might indicate infection or complications or something is wrong.

Further information

Councils register premises under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* for the purpose of overseeing infection control standards. Registration does not apply to the quality of procedures undertaken or the ability or qualifications of individuals undertaking the business.

If you have concerns about the premises, the services you have received or need information on your rights please contact:

- the council in which the premises is located
- Consumer Affairs Victoria
<<https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/>>.

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