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Tongue piercing: For that gap-toothed look

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Tongue piercing was a ritual tradition of the Maya and the Aztecs, ancient and -- apparently -- gap-toothed peoples. Now the dental cause and effect has been established: Those who choose to pierce their tongues run the risk of developing a gap between their teeth, says a report from the University at Buffalo School of Dental Medicine.



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The case study, led by Sawsan Tabbaa, an assistant professor of orthodontics at the UB School of Dental Medicine, involved a 26-year-old female patient who had developed a large space between her upper front teeth. She'd had a barbell-shaped tongue stud inserted seven years earlier.

The patient reported "playing" on a daily basis with her stud — a term commonly used by people with tongue piercings to describe the habit of pushing the metal stud up against and between their upper front teeth. Over time, the patient's front teeth separated, creating a gap large enough to permit her stud to push through.

Tabbaa explained in a phone interview that when you exposed teeth to a low, constant force — even nail biting and pencil chewing, let alone pushing a hard piece of metal up against the teeth — they will respond.

“Your teeth will move away from the pressure,” she said. Constant nail-biting could result in tilted or inwardly posed teeth, and pushing with a tongue stud moves the teeth outward and to the side.

Tabbaa explained that many people do not realize that a dental gap is a likely outcome of their piercing. Because it is something that happens slowly — with daily "playing," it takes from six months to two years for a space to be created, Tabbaa said — they might be unaware of the consequences.

The study was published in the July issue of the Journal of Clinical Orthodontics. Here's a [press release describing the study](#). (The study itself is not yet available online.)

Spaces between the teeth aren't the only potential consequences of getting your tongue pierced. Tabbaa said that chipped teeth (from the metal hitting the tooth) and gum recession are more common. A previous [UB Dental School survey of Buffalo high school students](#) found problems such as tongue tenderness and swelling, fungal infections, cracked and fractured teeth, bleeding gums and tooth loss. “When people get their tongue pierced, they never think about what can happen,” Tabbaa said.

Wow. It's enough to leave you tongue-tied.

-- Jessie Schiewe

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