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1 in 10 adults has a non-earlobe piercing

One in ten adults in England have had a piercing somewhere other than their ear lobe, with a quarter experiencing complications, and one in 100 piercings resulting in a hospital admission, according to a study published on bmj.com today.

The study, carried out by public health doctors from the Health Protection Agency and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, also found that women are three times more likely than men to have a body piercing and the most popular piercing site is the navel.

Over ten thousand people (10,503) aged 16 and over took part in the survey. These are the first published estimates of the proportion of the English population with non earlobe piercings and the rate of complications after having a piercing.

Piercing is more common among women than men, with nearly half the women (46.2%) surveyed aged 16 years having a body piercing. Of all the piercings in the survey a navel piercing was the most popular (33%), followed by nose (19%), ear (13%), tongue (9%), nipple (9%), eyebrow (8%), lip (4%) and genital (2%).

The type of piercing also varied by gender with nipple piercing being the most popular among men but one of the least popular among women, while navel piercing was by far the most popular in women but was rare in men. Genital piercing, while uncommon, was found to be twice as popular among men as women.

As well as being more likely to have a piercing, people aged 16 years were also more likely to suffer from complications, with almost a third (31%) reporting problems and one in seven (15.2%) seeking professional help.

Four out of five (80%) piercings were performed in specialist piercing shops, with the researchers saying a "worrying" one in ten (9%) tongue piercings were performed by non-specialists. In every anatomical site, including the tongue and genital areas, they found a

number of people who said they had performed the piercing themselves or they'd had it done by a friend or relative.

The most common problems with piercings were swelling, infection and bleeding, with tongue piercings being the most likely to cause problems almost half resulted in complications. Serious complications were significantly more likely to occur if the piercing had been performed by a non-specialist.

The researchers say the clear trend in piercing by age group in both sexes confirms that piercing is a fairly recent phenomenon and add, if its popularity continues, it could "place a significant burden on health services for many years."

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