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Body art as a form of human expression is prevalent. The most common types are skin tattoos and piercings, but also include scarification, branding, subdermal implants, and body painting. Body painting has made headlines for its artistic creativity and artistic significance at annual week-long temporary communities such as the annual Burning Man art festival.

Culture and history

Culturally, however, body painting has significant historical significance, with Henna painting described in the earliest Hindu Vedic ritual books dating back 5,000 years. Henna painting, most commonly of the hands and feet, known as Mehndi in the Indian subcontinent, signifies painting of symbolic representations of the outer and the inner sun, with the idea of “awakening the inner light.” It is also a common tradition of Hindu weddings and applied in Muslim tradition in India during Eid festivals. Body painting has also been used in other cultures for ceremonial, religious reasons, as well as forms of camouflage during hunting or war. Branding and scarification were used as methods of punishment during the Middle Ages in England and commonly during slavery in the Americas. Traditionally, though, branding and scarification have been seen in darker-skinned individuals as a form of self-expression where tattoos are not as effective visually. African tribes in Ethiopia and Sudan, as well as the Maasai people in Kenya, have used scarification and branding as an ancient art that can signify everything from beauty to transition to adulthood. Some black fraternities also use it as a mark of collegiality.

While tattoos are the most recognized form of body art, body and facial piercing are far more common in the general population among cultures throughout the world. While ear piercings are the most common, historically, nostril piercing has been documented in the

Middle East as far back as 4,000 years ago, and both ear and nostril piercing and jewelry are mentioned historically in the Bible (Genesis 24:22, Isaiah 3:21). Ritual tongue piercing was reportedly performed by Aztec and Mayan Indians during ceremonies to honor their deities.

Current practice

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piercings, including but not limited to ear, nose (alar, septum, bridge), eyebrow, lip, tongue, face, nipple, umbilical, and genital piercings. Ear piercings alone may come in many forms. Not only do location, cartilage versus no cartilage involvement, and age of piercing have different implications for care and potential risks/complications, so do the size, type, and shape of jewelry used for the piercing.

Having a better understanding of piercing art is important for dermatologists and dermatologic surgeons because we sometimes treat the sequelae, including infection, allergic reactions from the jewelry, and keloid scars. Pa-

tients may intentionally create large size piercings, known as gauge piercings, and decide later they no longer want them. Or earlobe piercings can unintentionally stretch and enlarge over time from prolonged wearing of heavy earrings or trauma, sometimes resulting in a partial or complete earlobe split, requiring surgical treatment for gauge or split earlobe repair. If repiercing earlobe repair is desired, most physicians wait at least 6-8 weeks. While different earlobe surgical repair techniques (most commonly Z-plasty) and even recommendations for subdermal implant removal are described in the literature, there are no real guidelines on when to repierce in the evidenced-based literature. Healing time in general for piercings also varies by site. For example, initial earlobe piercings typically take 1-2 months to heal, whereas ear cartilage and navel piercings may take 4-12 months.

Some medical practitioners may not be aware of tips known to top piercing professionals that can help guide patients on piercing care. Cartilage piercings can sometimes present with inflammation and nodule formation, even prior to true keloid formation. In my experience, a simple solution of washing daily with a highly alkaline but gentle natural soap, such as Dr. Bronner’s mild baby soap, or compresses or soaks with warm salt water, can sometimes reduce the inflammation and resolve nodule formation before topical, intralesional corticosteroids, or surgery is needed (a situation in which surgery may lead to further cartilage inflammation and hypertrophic scar formation). Additionally, certain pressure earrings may be used to help prevent keloid formation, in addition to wearing jewelry of a metal that is nonallergenic to the user, to prevent further inflammation.

Piercing is a common form of body art and self-expression. Understanding piercing art can not only help us understand how to better treat the sequelae of piercing, but also develop a better understanding of and relationship with our patients by virtue of their means of artistic self-expression. ■



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