

Glossary, Piercing Practices, and Other Information:

Body Modification - Anatomy, Alteration, and Art in Anthropogeny

Amputation: The deliberate and complete removal of a portion of the body (excluding the teeth).

Anneal: 1. To heat and then cool (as steel or glass) usually for softening and making less brittle; also: to cool slowly, usually in a furnace. 2. To strengthen, toughen.

Aztec: A term partly synonymous with **Mexica** and is used in popular culture to identify the political and cultural group centered on the city of Tenochtitlan.

Before common era (BCE): A notation for the Gregorian calendar. BCE 1 precedes immediately before 1 CE with no intervening year zero.

Before present (BP): A time scale used in archaeological dating in which the present is considered the year radiocarbon dating was introduced (1950 CE).

Bioarchaeology (oste archaeology): The study of human remains in their archaeological context.

Biocompatibility: The ability to coexist with living organisms without harming them. Compatible with living cells, tissues, organs, or systems, and posing no risk of injury, toxicity, or rejection by the immune system.

Body jewelry: Jewelry designed and manufactured specifically for use in **piercings**.

Body piercer: A professional with more than one year of work experience in an appropriate facility who performs the act of **body piercing** using approved techniques and materials. See also **ear-piercing gun operator**.

Body piercing: 1. The act of perforating, or **piercing**, the tissue of the body, including the ear, and inserting an ornament into the opening. 2. A perforation in the tissue of the body and the wearing of an ornament in the opening. 3. Common usage: The perforation itself. E.g., "I changed the jewelry in my piercing." 4. Common usage: The ornament that is worn in a perforation of the tissue. More accurately described as piercing jewelry, body piercing jewelry, or body jewelry. E.g., "My piercing fell out." See also, **piercing**.

Bone shaping: The deliberate alteration of the shape of one or more bones.

Cartilage: A type of tough, fibrous, elastic connective tissue that is rich in polysaccharides and with no nerve or blood supply of its own. There are two types of cartilage piercers routinely deal with:

- Auricular: Cartilage of the pinna (external ear).
- Alar: Cartilage of the tip and sides of the nose (nostrils).

Cauterization: Intentional burning to the body to create scars.

Chichen Itza: A Mayan city in Yucatan that rose to regional prominence after 800 CE.

Circumcision: "Cutting around." This term is used traditionally to describe both male and **female genital modifications**.

Clitoridectomy: The cutting and removal of all or part of the externally protruding glans of the clitoris. Also called Type 1 **female genital modification**. See also, **excision**.

Common era (CE): A notation for the Gregorian calendar. 1 CE follows immediately after BCE 1 with no intervening year zero.

Deinfibulation: A procedure (often medically performed) to partially open an **infibulation** for easier passage of urine and menses, intercourse, and childbirth.

Dental ablation: The deliberate removal of healthy teeth for ornamentation, rites of passage, and to signal group affiliation.

Dental modification: The deliberate, permanent alteration of one or more teeth.

Desiderata: Latin for "things desired."

Dorsal slit: An incision to the male foreskin above the glans. Synonymous with **superincision**.

Ear-piercing gun: A mechanical device, instrument, or system designed for **piercing** the earlobe.

Ear-piercing gun operator: A person who pierces using an **ear-piercing gun**. Sometimes referred to as a technician by the device manufacturers.

Edema: Swelling caused by excess fluid in the circulatory system or the tissues between the body's cells. Edema can be from a chemical reaction, an infection, trauma to the area, or other causes.

Epithelial tissue: 1. A tissue consisting of one or more layers of compactly joined cells of various types and sizes that cover a surface or line a cavity. 2. Pertaining to or involving the outer layer of the skin. Also called 'epithelium.'

Excision: The cutting and removal of some of the tissues of the female genitalia (clitoral glans and labia minora). Excision is more extensive than **clitoridectomy**. Also called Type 2 **female genital modification** and is another term for 'female circumcision.'

Fascia: A fibrous connective tissue forming a membrane that covers, supports, and separates muscles. Fascia also unites the skin with underlying tissue.

Female Genital Cosmetic Surgeries (FGCS): Medical plastic surgery of the female genitalia, such as **labiaplasty**.

Female Genital Modification (FGM): A collective term for all non-medically indicated procedures involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs.

Fistula (in body piercing): The tunnel of epithelial tissue that surrounds a healed **piercing** channel.

Flora: Microorganisms including bacteria, protozoa, and fungi that are found on or in specific areas of the body.

Fomite: An inanimate object or substance that is capable of transmitting infectious organisms from one individual to another.

Freehand piercing: The act of **piercing** without the use of forceps.

Gauge: 1. A standard of dimensions or measurement – in body jewelry, the thickness. 2. Slang for the act of "**stretching**" a **piercing**.

Gauges: Slang term for **body jewelry**, especially plugs or tunnels worn in stretched ear **piercings**.

Gauging: A slang term for **stretching** a **piercing**. See also, stretching.

Genital modification: The deliberate, permanent alteration of the male (penis, testicles) or female (vulva) genitals.

Hypoallergenic: Having a decreased tendency to provoke an allergic reaction.

Iberomaurusian: A type of lithic industry featuring a backed bladelet specific to the coasts of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia dating between 25,000 and 11,000 years ago.

Infibulation: A procedure that partially closes the inner or outer labia across the urethral meatus and vaginal opening through cutting, suturing, or sealing to leave a smooth scar.

Insertion: In **piercing**, the act of putting jewelry into an existing pierced channel, often with the aid of an **insertion taper**.

Insertion taper: A tapered tool that is designed to facilitate the process of inserting jewelry into a **piercing**.

Labia stretching: The lengthening of the inner or outer labia through a regimen of pulling and **stretching**, often with herbs. Formerly included in the World Health Organization (WHO) typology of **female genital modifications**. Also known as "labia minora elongation," or LME.

Labiaplasty: A plastic surgery to cut and remove part of the genital labia, often to reduce the inner labia so they are contained behind the outer labia.

Maguey plant (*Agave americana*): A flowering plant of the *Asparagaceae* family that is native to Mexico and the United States (Texas). It is commonly used for ornamentation in arid climates due to its drought tolerance, in cuisine and distilling (tequila), as medicine, and to make ropes, nets, bags, cloth, and paper.

Maxillary central incisor (in humans): One of the large, two front teeth of the upper jaw.

Maya: The term used to refer to (1) a group of indigenous languages spoken from Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador; (2) the people who speak those languages, considered as an ethnic group; (3) the archaeological culture of the ancestors of the contemporary speakers of Maya languages.

Mayapan: A walled Maya city in Yucatan built after 1000 CE and abandoned before 1500 CE.

Mechanical piercing device: A commercial or homemade tool designed to assist or perform the actual **piercing** of the tissue.

Mesoamerica: The area from central Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador occupied by a network of indigenous societies united by use of related calendars, similar technologies, and the exchange of materials needed to support those technologies before the entry of Europeans into the region.

Mexica: The ethnic group that composed **Aztec** society in central Mexico during the 16th century CE.

Mixtec: An indigenous language spoken in the Mexican state of Oaxaca; The people who speak this language are considered an ethnic group.

Mutilation: An involuntary, permanent alteration of the body.

MYA: An abbreviation for "millions of years ago."

Natufian culture: An archaeological culture of the Neolithic

Levant dating to around 15,000 to 11,500 years ago that was sedentary or semi-sedentary prior to the introduction of agriculture.

Neural circuit: A neural circuit is a functional entity of interconnected neurons that is able to regulate its own activity using a feedback loop.

Obsidian: A type of igneous rock occurring as a natural glass formed by the rapid cooling of viscous lava from volcanoes. Sometimes called "volcanic glass."

Oldupai Gorge (Olduvai): A 48km ravine in the Great Rift Valley in Tanzania that was occupied by hominins such as *Homo habilis* (1.9 mya) and *Zinjanthropus (Australopithecus) boisei* (1.8 mya). Today, Oldupai Gorge is an important paleoanthropological site and has been under excavation since 1913, most famously by Mary and Louis Leakey. "Oldupai" is the Maasai word for "the place of the wild **sisal**."

Otomi: A minority ethnic group of central Mexico during the 16th century CE.

Penile Implants: Foreign objects embedded beneath the skin of the penis.

Permanent body modification (PBM): Intentional permanent or semipermanent alterations of the living human body for reasons such as ritual, folk medicine, aesthetics, or corporal punishment. In general, voluntary changes are considered to be modifications, and involuntary changes are considered **mutilations**.

Piercing: 1. The deliberate creation of a hole in the skin and/or flesh, often to hold an ornament such as an earring. 2. perforation itself. (e.g., "I changed the jewelry in my piercing"). 4. The ornament that is worn in a perforation of the tissue. More accurately described as piercing jewelry, body piercing jewelry, or body jewelry. (e.g., "My piercing fell out").

Playa de los Muertos: A village in Honduras occupied from before 700 BCE to ca. 200 BCE. It also refers to the style of figurines produced and used there.

Pricking: Ritual pricking of the prepuce or clitoris to draw a drop of blood. This is sometimes used as a substitute by those seeking to maintain a custom in a minimal way that does not leave lasting damage.

Pulque: An intoxicating beverage made by fermenting fructose-rich juice collected from the heart of the **maguey plant**.

Reinfibulation: Resuturing or tightening of an **infibulation** scar, particularly after childbirth, or for restoring vaginal tightness.

Scarification: The deliberate alteration of the skin to create scars, often through cutting or burning.

Single-point piercing (aka surface anchor): 1. A type of **body piercing** in which a tiny ornament is inserted into a single opening that is formed in the tissue. This opening is the entrance as well as the exit. 2. The **body jewelry** used in such a **piercing**.

Sisal (*Sansevieria ehrenbergii*): Also known as "East African wild sisal," it is a dry-adapted plant with many uses, such as for making natural bandages, rope, instrument strings, baskets, roofs, and clothes. True sisal is *Agave sisalana*, an American plant related to **maguey**.

Stretching: In terms of **body piercing**, "stretching" describes the enlargement method of a sufficient force, passively or actively, that triggers a genetic cellular response to produce more cells resulting in an enlargement of the **piercing fistula** and growth in the immediate area's connected skin tissue.

Subincision: "Cutting below." An incision along the bottom of the shaft of the penis, from the urethral meatus and downward toward the scrotum, of varying depth and length.

Superincision: "Cutting above." An incision to the male foreskin above the glans. Synonymous with **dorsal slit**.

Tattooing: The deliberate insertion of pigment into the skin to create visible marks.

Tlaxcallan: The location of a settlement of **Tlaxcaltecs**, opponents of the **Mexica** in central Mexico.

Tlaxcaltecs: A population of central Mexico during the 16th century CE and who were military opponents of the neighboring **Mexica**.

Tool-assisted piercing: The term "tool-assisted piercing" is only needed when contrasting and comparing to "free-hand piercing" methods. While the syntagm explicitly includes the use of any tools during a **piercing** procedure, the implied emphasis is actually more concerning the distinction of using forceps.

Tula: The name of a city in oral histories from Mexico, also applied to specific archaeological sites. In oral histories, a source of authority for rulers of multiple sites.

Piercing Practices Overview

Provided by Paul R. King for CARTA 2024

The following abridge definitions provide a rudimentary foundation for understanding body piercing placements, techniques, tools, jewelry, aftercare, healing times, and trade definitions. While technology constantly changes, this is the most current and reliable information at the time of writing. This information is provided for archaeologists to have greater understanding of generalizable processes of body piercing in order to contrast and compare to the practices and materiality from other peoples' past. Just as in any vocation, there exists a plethora of opinions on the nuances of best practices in current Western body piercing.

These definitions are from the upcoming Oxford University Press book, *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Body Modification*, and includes information that has been gathered from the Association of Professional Piercers' (APP) literature and website, APP-approved senior instructors and their presentations, lecture notes, articles, published books and Paul R King's professional experience.

Enlarging: According to the 2021 Association of Professional Piercers, "**stretching**" is defined as "the act of enlarging a **piercing**." Unfortunately, this definition needs to be reviewed. Baked into this current and common understanding is an assumption that the only method of enlargement is an application of some form of pressure to a secondarily healed fistula in order to push the cells into production of more tissue, thus "enlarging a piercing." This method of enlargement called "stretching" is the most popular in Western body piercing; however, there are at least four methods. Therefore, a definition for piercing enlargement should include any method by which the piercing aperture is enlarged whether during the initial piercing procedure or after the piercing has healed. The methods for enlargement are stretching, tearing, incising, and /or removal of tissue.

Stretching biology: Research focused on plastic surgeries provides insight into the mechanisms that occur during **stretching**. They study the processes of tissue development through applied mechanical pressure, such as inflation devices (Guo et al, 2022). The medical scientific field calls stretching "skin soft tissue expansion," when applying just enough force to load the epidermal cells (without overstressing) activates the production of more cells (Aragona et al, 2020). Both persistent and intermittent mechanical stretching are both shown effective (Tepole et al, 2011). Unfortunately, quantifiable studies for skin growth (skin soft tissue expansion by mechanical force) remain an understudied area, in part due to the complexity of variables.

Passive/unintentional methods of stretching: Often without realizing it, many piercees are engaged in passive **stretching**. Sleeping while wearing **body jewelry** subjects the **piercing** to unintentional forces that result from one's movement

during sleep. Force and motion during sexual activity can also stretch genital piercings. In addition, the heavier the jewelry the greater the gravitational force that will contribute to stretching. Centrifugal force is a factor with pendulous lobes carrying heavy rings or ear-weight style jewelry. The slow tear of wearing earrings too heavy to be adequately supported by a very thin wire should not be confused with stretching even though the result is an enlarged piercing. A generalized rule in the industry is the thicker the wire the heavier the jewelry can be worn safely and with comfort.

Active/intentional methods of stretching: The term "**stretching**" became more popular in the **piercing** vernacular sometime in the late eighties; prior, the term "enlargement" was most common. By the early 1990s, the term "stretching" dominated the literature and the vernacular with the rising popularity of piercing and enlargement.

Among professional piercers, "**gauge**" is only ever used as a noun to designate the unit of measurement for the jewelry's thickness and corresponding aperture size of a client's piercing. Colloquially, beginning in the 1990s, clients, then interviewers, and finally the general public began referring to large pieces of jewelry, such as ear spools, as well as the enlarged ear apertures as "**gauges**." While professional piercers still resist the term, "gauge" as a verb and a noun, it has become the dominant term since the 2000s (Google Ngram Viewer, 2022).

Jewelry stretching and the "dead stretch": The most common method of **stretching** is manipulating the jewelry worn. Tugging, twisting, sexual activity, and playing with all apply force to the **fistula** walls thus triggering cell growth and enlargement of the aperture.

Perhaps the next most common method of stretching is just shoving a larger piece of jewelry into the **piercing**. Within the piercing community, some folks refer to this process as a "dead stretch" [cite Piercing Bible]. Certainly, one of the oldest methods, the piercee or another person manipulates the larger jewelry into the aperture. Dead stretch methods are only safe if the tissue is healthy and already somewhat stretched. An obvious advantage is economic since no other tools are used. A common disadvantage is increased chance of irritation or injury.

One variation for piercings with thinner tissue and a shorter fistula is to angle the jewelry to approximately 45 degrees and manipulate the tissue until an edge clears the backside of the fistula. Then while maintaining that initial clearance; more tissue is cleared, working in a circular direction making sure no tissue slips back and continuing until the entire back edge of the jewelry has cleared the back edge of the fistula.

A second variation is to force the old jewelry out of the piercing with the new slightly larger jewelry. A slight reverse pressure needs to be applied to help maintain the connection and to keep gaps closed that could pinch the tissue. The addition of lubricant and basic hygiene of washing the piercing site, hands, and jewelry are immediate improvements on this method.

Multiple pieces of jewelry stretching: Another common method requiring an even lower skillset or investment is the addition of multiple rings or barbells. Utilizing materials that are already on hand can be quick and economical. The addition of the first ring can be the hardest. Once multiple rings are in place, the compounded movement and weight facilitates faster **stretching**. Sometimes the jewelry will pinch or saw the tissue, a potential downside to this method.

"Subang" stretching: Fakir Musafar was probably the first Westerner to implement and report the wrapping method of **stretching** that he noticed in ethnographic references. Photos of Balinese women wearing blades of palm leaves coiled into earplugs inspired a young Fakir to experiment with various tape-style materials to figure out which were most inert and successful for stretching. Using a material such as polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) plumber's tape was inert, thin, and tough enough to incrementally increase the size of the jewelry, providing a gradual pressure sufficient enough to force the production of more cells in the fistula and surrounding tissue, thus enlarging the piercing. The Balinese word for earring is subang. Fakir attributed through naming this wrapping technique, "subang." Like the palm leaf in SE Asia, plumber's tape is readily available and cheap in the West, making both desirable choices for their time and place. Over decades, the **body piercing** industry noticed a wide variance in the body's tolerance for the PTFE tape, for many the tape would work fine but was unsightly, for others the tape would partially dissolve, or the tissue would become inflamed. Since

there was no economic incentive for the body piercing industry to explore alternative materials, the subang method fell out of favor.

Stretching with tapers: There are two approaches to **stretching** with tapers, gradual-periodic expansion and rapid-durational expansion. By far, the most popular method of stretching among professional Western body piercers is the gradual-periodic expansion with tapers. With this method a tapered rod that begins smaller than the **piercing's** current **gauge** size smoothly and gradually increases up to the next gauge size. So, a 4-gauge taper would begin with a smaller than 6-gauge dull point and over 2 to 3 inches, gradually increase to 4-gauge. The end can be finished flat, concave, convex, pin-couple, or threaded depending on the jewelry to be connected and inserted. Various materials can be used such as glass, disposable or non-disposable plastics, and sometimes wood; however, stainless steel is the most common, followed by titanium; the latter can be anodized to color-code for quick sizing. Additionally, tapers are useful to professional piercers for reinserting of jewelry, reopening of an old piercing that has shrunk and become partially blocked with sebum, finding the wound path in a fresh piercing if the jewelry transfer is lost, and stabilizing the connection for a jewelry transfer in an initial piercing.

Lubrication should be discussed. In a pinch, a piercee at home might use their own saliva or a common inert oil, such as jojoba. Professional piercers will use either a water-based or petroleum-based sterile lubricant from a single use packet. Water-based lubricants leave less of a residue and quickly dissipate, therefore are preferred for the open wound of an initial piercing. However, petroleum-based lubricants reduce surface friction better and are more durable, lasting longer during a protracted procedure, therefore are ideal for stretching.

Stretching breaks of usually a couple to many months are crucial between stretches to allow for healing and new cell growth in the fistula. For larger gauges with heavier jewelry (such as steel above 4 gauge) a break can also give the body time to adjust to the increase in weight, which can irritate.

The rapid-durational expansion doesn't provide much of a break and therefore there is often little recovery between gauge jumps. With the rapid-durational expansion, a piercee will wear a straight, curved, or circular shaped taper as jewelry. Using a stopper, such as an O-ring, every few hours to couple of days they will adjust the taper to a tighter fit, accelerating several gauges in a few days or weeks. When performed this quickly, the piercing fistula will tear or dislodge resulting in an open wound and not a true stretch. However, on occasion, if this method is done carefully and much more slowly, stretching of the fistula can occur.

Prevalence rates for genital modification: The proportion of a defined population who have a specific characteristic during a defined time period. For male **circumcision** (the term commonly used in official statistics), prevalence is measured as the percentage of boys and men aged 15-64 (or in some countries 15 and above) who have been circumcised at any time in their lives. For **female genital modification**, or cutting

(FGM or FGM/C are the terms commonly used in statistics), prevalence is measured as the percentage of girls and women aged 15-49, who report having undergone any of the different forms of FGM. This differs from incidence, which would be the percentage of new cases that occur in a given year for a specific population. Currently, it is not possible to measure incidence.