

Piercing fad means holes in the head

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BODY PIERCING IS A little like body building: no pain, no gain.

Body piercing involves poking needles through lips, noses, tongues, genitals, belly buttons and yes, ears, for beauty, ritual and erotic sensation. The pleasure of beads, rings and other piercing jewelry more than compensates for the pain of the initial jab, advocates say.

"The No. 1 question I'm asked is, 'Doesn't that hurt?' The answer is, 'Yes, it hurts for the moment it takes for the needle to go through.' The return on the investment is definitely worth it," said Jim Ward, owner of The Gauntlet piercing salons in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Piercing and other types of "body modification" such as tattooing, branding and scarification — scarring designs into the skin — have become trendy in big cities.

A nose ring used to turn heads. Now the nostril is at the conservative end of the spectrum of punctured body parts.

"Those people who liked sushi and quiche five years ago are getting pierced today," said Susie Quon, who runs The Gauntlet's

mail order services.

Ward, who began piercing in his Los Angeles home 15 years ago, has become something of a godfather to piercing culture. By opening outlets where people can browse for jewelry one moment and get pierced the next, he's helped make piercing stylish. His store competes with a shop called Body Manipulations. Smaller retailers, tattoo salons and hobby piercers also do piercing.

The Gauntlet looks something like a cross between a hair salon and a dentist's office. It's plushly decorated with gray wall-to-wall carpeting and a lighted case of African Violets. Piercers work in private, sterile-looking cubicles.

About 500 people come through the shop each week, about 100 of whom get pierced, say store managers. Most piercings cost \$25, plus the cost of the jewelry, and each additional jab is \$10 during the same visit.

A woman named Denise recently had her left eyebrow pierced at the shop — for a second time. She didn't even flinch when Ward stuck a 2-inch-long needle through her flesh, and seemed unfazed when blood gushed as he slipped a stud into the hole.

"It was very smooth," said

Denise, who declined to give her last name. "It's a very loving atmosphere here."

She said she has eleven piercings, but wouldn't say where.

Others aren't so enthusiastic. One common perception is that people who punch holes in themselves are trying to revive past childhood abuses.

Indeed, some of the more radical piercing practices do involve self-inflicted pain, seen as a way to reach a higher spiritual state.

Dr. David Spiegel, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral science at Stanford University's School of Medicine, said he hasn't studied piercing specifically, but does see occasional cases of self-mutilation.

"There are many psychiatric patients who mutilate or harm themselves and they either feel that somehow it's a deserved punishment or that somehow they are taking control over forces that could hurt them," he said.

The Gauntlet publishes Piercing Fans International Quarterly, or PI, a magazine that includes interviews with notable piercers, graphic how-to photographs and such stories as "The Female Nipple Update," with detailed instructions for sterilizing needles.

Ward also has produced a video

called "Piercing with a Pro," and was featured prominently in "Modern Primitives" a \$15 trade book that helped popularize piercing and explain its long history.

"You find bits and pieces of piercing in almost every culture," Ward said.

Roman centurions wore nipple rings as a sign of virility and courage, navel piercing was a sign of royalty to ancient Egyptians, and ancient Hindu men pierced their genitals for erotic pleasure, according to Ward.

But for most of today's squeamish mainstream, the question persists: Why would someone want to pierce his privates?

It feels good, say those who've done it. Well, maybe not right away.

"A little piece of metal through strategic parts of the body, when manipulated, can be extremely pleasurable," Ward said.

Piercing also provides an important social symbol, like tattooing, Ward said.

"Our society is sadly lacking in rites of passage," said Ward. "So people tend to create their own. A kid who goes into the Army gets drunk and gets a tattoo. On an unconscious level, it's a boy becoming a man. Piercing fulfills essentially the same need."