Body piercings have seen a resurgence of interest in the last ten to twenty years and are becoming more and more a part of the mainstream Western culture. Take a look at any fashion or entertainment magazine and you'll see plenty of well-known celebrities with body piercings like navel rings or a labret. You might be surprised to find out that piercing is actually an ancient form of expression that most cultures have practiced at some time or other for thousands of years. Egyptian body piercings reflected status and love of beauty

The earliest known mummified remains of a human that was pierced is over 5,000 years old. This worthy gentleman had his ears pierced with larger-gauge plugs in his ears, so plugs may be one of the oldest forms of body modification there is! We also know that the Egyptians loved to adorn themselves elaborately, and even restricted certain types of body piercings to the royal family. In fact, only pharaoh himself could have his navel pierced. Any one else who tried to get a belly button ring could be executed. (Tell that to Britney Spears!) Almost every well-to-do Egyptian wore earrings, though, to display their wealth and accent their beauty. Elaborate enameled and gold earrings frequently portrayed items in nature such as lotus blossoms.

Body piercings are also mentioned in the Bible. In the Old Testament it's obvious that body jewelry is considered a mark of beauty and wealth, especially for Bedouin and nomadic tribes. In many cases, body jewelry was given as a bridal gift or as part of a dowry. It is clear that piercing was a sign of status and attractiveness in Biblical times.

Romans were practical piercers Romans were very practical people, and for them piercing almost always served a purpose. Roman centurions pierced their nipples not because they liked the way it looked, but to signify their strength and virility. It was a badge of honor that demonstrated the centurion's dedication to the Roman Empire. As a symbol, it was important and served a specific function, unifying and bonding the army. Even Julius Caesar pierced his nipples to show his strength and his identification with his men. Genital piercing through the head of the penis was performed on gladiators, who were almost always slaves, for two reasons. A ring through the head of the penis could be used to tie the organ back to the testicles with a length of leather. In gladiatorial combat, this prevented serious injury. With a large enough ring or bar, it also prevented the slave from having sex without the owner's consent. Since the gladiator was "property," a stud fee could be charged to another slave owner for the highly prized opportunity to raise the next generation of great fighter.

Going across the ocean at around the same time, the Aztecs, Maya and some American Indians practiced tongue piercing as part of their religious rituals. It was thought to bring them closer to their gods and was a type of ritual blood-letting. The Aztec and Maya were warrior tribes, and also practiced septum piercing in order to appear fiercer to their enemies. Nothing looks quite as frightening as an opponent sporting a huge boar tusk thrust through his nose!

This practice was also common among tribes in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Some of the materials commonly used were bone, tusks and feathers. Hundreds of years later, French fur trappers in Washington State discovered American Indian tribes who wore bones through their septum and called them the Nez Perce, meaning "Pierced Noses" in French.

In Central and South America, lip labrets were popular for purely aesthetic reasons - women with pierced lips were considered more attractive. In fact, the holes were often stretched to incredible size as progressively larger wooden plates were inserted to emphasize the lips as much as possible. The Aztecs and Maya also sported lip labrets of gold and jade, many of them elaborately carved into mythical or religious figures or sporting gemstones. These were seen as highly attractive and to enhance sexuality.

As the world moved into the dark ages, interest in piercing died down somewhat and the medieval church began to condemn it as sinful. For a few hundred years, Western civilization abandoned the practice. As the Renaissance went into full swing, however, interest in piercing began to pick up again. A new era and a new interest in body piercings Sailors became convinced that piercing one ear would improve their long-distance site, and so the site of a sailor with a gold or brass ring became common. Word also spread that should a sailor be washed ashore after a shipwreck, the finder should keep the gold ring in exchange for providing a proper Christian burial. Sailors were both religious and superstitious, so they generally spent a lot for a large gold earring to hedge their bets.

Men became much more fashion-conscious during the Renaissance and Elizabethan eras, and almost any male member of the nobility would have at least one earring, if not more. Large pearl drops and enormous diamond studs were a great way to advertise your wealth and standing in the community. It could also designate royal favor if your earring was a gift from a member of the royal family. Women, not wanting to be outshone by the men in all their finery, began to wear plunging necklines, with the Queen of Bavaria introducing the most outrageous, which consisted of not much at all above the waist. In order to adorn themselves, women began piercing their nipples to show off their jewelry. Soon they began wearing chains and even strands of pearls draped between the two.

Men and women both discovered that these nipple piercings were also delightful playthings in bed, adding sensitivity to the breasts and giving the men both visual and tactile stimulation. Men began getting pierced purely for pleasure as well. While not entirely mainstream, piercing of the nipples and, occasionally, the genitals, continued to hold interest for members of the upper crust of society in Europe on and off for the next few hundred years.

The next resurgence of interest was, surprisingly, during the Victorian age, which is usually seen as very repressed. Prince Albert, future husband of Queen Victoria, is said to have gotten the penis piercing that is named after him in order wear the tight-fitting trousers so popular at the time. The ring could then be attached to a hook on the inside of one pant leg, tucked safely away between the legs for a neat, trim look. Although we have no record of Victoria's response to the piercing itself, there is ample evidence she was wildly in love with her husband and almost never left his side after their marriage! Soon, Victorian men were getting Prince Albert's, frenums and a variety of other piercings purely for the pleasurable sexual effects, and women were doing the same. By the 1890's, it was almost expected that a woman would have her nipples pierced. In fact, some doctors at the time suggested it improved conditions for breastfeeding, although not all agreed. It was an interesting double standard -- plenty of people were doing it, but no one was talking about it.

Modern-day body piercings In the last hundred years or so, body piercings in the Western world have mostly been limited to the ears, a standard hold-over from the fact that both men and women wore earrings during Elizabethan times. The Puritan movement did away with men wearing earrings, however, and it didn't really regain popularity until recently. Nose rings found new interest when young people (they were called hippies then) from the U.S. began traveling in India extensively looking for enlightenment in the 1960's. They noticed the nostril rings that most women had been wearing there since the sixteenth century. In India, this was a form of traditional, accepted adornment and was often linked to an earring by a chain. For rebellious teens from America, it was a great form of rebellion. After bringing nose piercings back to the U.S., the interest in body piercings of all kinds quickly caught on during the 1980's and 1990's. Celebrities, sports stars and singers all began sporting a variety of piercings. Soon, high school students and even stay-at-home moms were flashing new body piercings. And the rest, as they say, is history!