

TATTOO

Article by K. Sugg

A Healthy Look at GETTING INKED

Tattooing has been around a long time. The oldest known tattooed person is a mummy, Ötzi the iceman, who is believed to be over 5,000 years old. The art form and techniques have evolved quite a lot since then. Tattooing has skyrocketed in popularity in the past 10 years. As with any procedure done on your body, there are health and safety considerations to take into account. Before you get a tattoo, you'll want to know what's involved with this permanent type of body art, and how to reduce the possible risks.

HOW TATTOOS ARE APPLIED

A tattoo is a permanent design made on your skin with inks inserted through pinhole pricks into the skin's dermis—the second layer of skin just below the epidermis. A tattoo is considered a medical procedure because the tattoo artist uses a mechanized needle to puncture the skin between 50-3,000 times per minute, with each puncture depositing a drop of insoluble ink under the skin. The tattooing process is done without anesthetics, and causes a small amount of bleeding, along with slight (to potentially significant) pain depending on the area being tattooed.

Know the Risks

Because tattoo application breaches the skin, bloodborne diseases, skin infections, and other complications are possible, including:

ALLERGIC REACTIONS

Tattoo dyes can cause allergic skin reactions, or itchy rash at the tattoo site. This is especially true of the red, green, yellow, and blue dyes. Some people also have allergies to the topical antibiotic ointment that is applied after the tattoo process.

SKIN INFECTIONS

Like any open wound, a fresh tattoo can become infected from bacteria if care is not taken.

INFLAMED, SCALY SKIN

If you have an existing skin condition, consult with your doctor prior to getting a tattoo, as getting a tattoo can aggravate it.

OTHER SKIN PROBLEMS

Sometimes an area of inflammation (called a granuloma) can form around tattoo ink. Tattooing can also result in keloids — raised areas caused by an overgrowth of scar tissue.

BLOODBORNE DISEASES

If the tattoo equipment is contaminated with infected blood, you can contract various bloodborne diseases — including MRSA, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

MRI COMPLICATIONS

Though rare, tattoo pigments can interfere with MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) image quality, and can cause swelling or burning in the affected areas during an MRI exam.



Safety & Sanitation

To help ensure that your tattoo will be applied safely, be aware of these safety measures:

TRAINING MATTERS

Go to a reputable tattoo studio with employees who are properly trained on safety. Tattoo artists must take bloodborne pathogen training yearly. Keep in mind that regulation requirements and licensing standards vary from state to state. Check with your city, county, or state health department for information on tattoo licensing and regulations.

USE OF GLOVES

The tattoo artist should wash his/her hands and wear a fresh pair of well-fitting gloves for each procedure.

INK/BLOOD

"If there's ink on it, there's blood on it." There should not be any ink stains anywhere in the area.

NEW/UNUSED SUPPLIES

Make sure the tattoo artist uses new supplies; needles and tubes should come from sealed packages and be removed in your presence. Pigments, trays, containers, markers, and transfer paper should also be new/unused.

SANITIZED WORK AREA

Work tables, chairs, handles, and sinks should be sanitized and disinfected with a commercial disinfectant or bleach solution after each use.

BIOHAZARDS

Needles and needle cartridges, along with any razor blades, should be disposed of after each session into a biohazard "sharps" container.

NO SNACKS OR SMOKES

According to OSHA, tattoo artists are not supposed to eat or smoke in the body art studio.

STERILIZATION

All non-disposable equipment is supposed to be sterilized with an autoclave machine, which uses heat to sterilize instruments between customers.

CARING FOR A TATTOO

Because a tattoo is an open wound, it is crucial to follow the tattoo artist's instructions about the after care of a tattoo to avoid infections. The tattoo artist will apply antibiotic ointment over the tattoo and cover it with a bandage or plastic wrap with instructions about when to remove it as well as further instructions on its care.

On average, it takes at least two weeks for a tattoo to heal. During this time, avoid exposing your tattoo to too much sun; tattooed skin is more sensitive than the rest of the skin on your body.

Be sure to keep the tattooed skin clean with plain soap and water, and apply a moisturizer to the skin.

Stay out of pools, hot tubs, rivers, lakes and other bodies of water while your tattoo is healing. If you think your tattoo might be infected or you're concerned that your tattoo isn't healing properly, contact your doctor.

