

Tattoos

What is a tattoo?

A tattoo is a design made on your skin with a needle and ink. Because the ink goes deeply into the skin, the design is permanent.

How is it done?

Tattoos used to be done by hand but now they are done mostly with an electric tool. The tool works a lot like a sewing machine. The needle goes in and out of your skin, putting ink into each hole.

As the needles go into your skin, you will have some bleeding and pain. The pain may be mild (like tingling) or it may be severe (like being stung by a bee many times). How much pain you have depends on the tattoo artist's skill, the part of your body where you get the tattoo, and how you react to pain.

Getting a simple tattoo can take 15 or 20 minutes. A large, complex tattoo can take hours or several hours over several days.

What are the risks of getting a tattoo?

Some of the problems that can happen after you get a tattoo include:

- Skin infection
- Allergic reaction to the ink, which may cause symptoms such as redness, swelling, and itching, even years after you got the tattoo
- Skin problems, such as raised bumps and scars around the tattoo
- Infectious disease, such as tetanus, HIV, or hepatitis, if the studio and needles are not clean and sterile
- Regret that you got the tattoo. Your tattoo may include a name or a picture that you don't want on your body any more. Or the design may stretch or change appearance as you get older, or gain or lose weight.

How do I prepare for the tattoo?

There are a number of things to do before you get a tattoo to make sure it's safe.

- Check with your healthcare provider to make sure that you don't have a health problem that might make it unsafe, such as heart disease, diabetes, a bleeding disorder, or a problem with your immune system.
- Make sure that all of your shots are up to date, including hepatitis and tetanus shots. Because there is a risk of infection, pregnant women should wait until after the baby is born to get a tattoo.
- Make sure the place where the tattooing is done is clean. It should be a separate room from where body piercing is done. The area should be free from things that could spread germs, like cell phones, combs, purses, or food.
- Make sure the tattoo artist is trained and licensed.

- Ask:
 - How tools are cleaned and if a machine called an autoclave is used. (An autoclave uses heat to sterilize the tools.) Sterile tools should be used with each customer.
 - If the tattoo artist washes their hands with antibacterial soap and puts on clean gloves before each tattoo is done. Sterile needles should be used, and the bottles of ink should be new, unopened and not used before.
 - If tattoo artist will clean and disinfect your skin before and after you get the tattoo and put a bandage over your new tattoo.
 - How to care for your tattoo, how to prevent infection and other problems, and what symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them.

If you are unsure about the artist or the studio, find a different place to get your tattoo.

How should I care for my tattoo?

It can take up to 2 weeks for your tattoo to heal. Follow your care instructions closely. Some general tips to follow while the tattooed area is healing include:

- Remove the bandage in 24 hours or less, as your tattoo artist recommends.
- After you remove the bandage:
 - Do not touch the tattoo or pick at scabs that form.
 - Keep the area clean. Wash it gently with mild soap and water 2 or 3 times a day. Pat it dry and let it air dry for a few minutes. Then put a thin layer of ointment on the area. Don't use an antibiotic or Vaseline (petroleum product) ointment. Some people are allergic to antibiotics in ointments and creams. Petroleum products, like Vaseline, can make the tattoo fade. They may also keep the skin under the ointment too moist and increase the likelihood of infection.
 - When you take a bath or shower, don't soak the tattooed area in water or put it directly under the shower.
 - Avoid wearing clothes that can rub or irritate the skin under or around the tattoo. You may need to cover the tattoo with a bandage or piece of gauze to prevent irritation, but remove the bandage as often as possible to expose the tattoo to the air.
 - Watch for signs of infection, which include fever and increased swelling, redness, drainage, or a bad smell. If you see any of these signs, call your healthcare provider. If the tattoo gets infected, you will need medical care, including an antibiotic.
 - Avoid swimming and hot tubs until your skin heals.
 - Keep the tattooed area out of the sun until it is fully healed. Once it's healed, use a sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 30 to protect your skin and keep the tattoo from fading.

What can I do if I want to remove my tattoo?

Tattoos are meant to be permanent. Removing one is not easy. You will need to see a dermatologist (skin doctor) or plastic surgeon to have it removed.

- Removal is usually done with a laser. It may take 5 to 20 laser sessions to remove your tattoo. Removal is costly and can be painful.
- Some tattoos cannot be removed completely. It depends on how deep the needle went into your skin and what types of ink were used.
- When your tattoo is removed, there is a risk for infection and scarring. The skin in the area where you had the tattoo may be a different color than normal.

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