

# Tattoo & Body Piercing

## What is a tattoo?

Tattooing is the placement of pigment particles underneath the upper layers of the skin where they will remain throughout the lifetime of the person. This can be done by cutting or burning the skin and rubbing coloring matter into the wounds, drawing on the skin and poking the ink in with a needle, and using modern electric tattoo machines.

With the exception of Japan, where professional tattooing is still done by hand, most professional tattooists in developed countries use the electric tattoo gun. A tattoo gun consists of a rotating motor in a handle connected to a bar that runs a shaft to the 1 to 14 solid bore needles being used for a particular design. When the motor is activated, the needles move up and down several hundred times per minute. The tattooist holds the tattoo gun at a constant level over the skin, and the needles repeatedly puncture the skin.

Ink is either placed on the skin and pushed in by the needles or the needles are repeatedly dipped in the ink and the gun is run over the skin. Excess ink and the small amounts of blood that oozes from the site are repeatedly wiped away. The length of the process depends on the size and complexity of the tattoo.

## I have been thinking about getting a tattoo. Are there health risks?

Tattooing carries several medical risks, including the transmission of infectious diseases. Despite medical reports on infections associated with tattooing, the actual risk of infection from this procedure is unknown. However, there are far more infections associated with tattoos acquired in prison, at home, on the streets, or as part of rituals, than from professional tattoo parlors.

In modern professional tattoo parlors with high standards, certain precautions are taken. A separate small container of dye is used for each customer and thrown away after use. Needles and the tattoo gun are sterilized with steam or dry heat following each use. The tattoo site is cleaned well before the procedure and dressed with antiseptic ointment and a sterile bandage. The artist wears latex gloves, and the sponges or tissues used for wiping away blood are disposed of after each use. The customer is advised on proper wound care following the procedure.

Many or all of these precautions often are not taken with tattoos administered in prison or at home. Also, non-professional tattooists may use saliva to wipe away blood, to improve healing, to relieve the initial pain, or make ink (mix the saliva with dry pigments).

## **What infections can be transmitted by tattooing?**

A variety of infections have been related with tattooing over the years. The most common are local skin infections at the site of the tattoo. While they can occur as a result of professional tattooing, most often they result from the customer not following instructions on wound care or from tattoos done in prisons, at home, or other locations.

Of concern are viruses that are transmitted by blood such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV). This is because transfer of blood from an infected person to someone else by unsterilized reusable needles can lead to infection. All three of these viruses can result in significant health problems, such as liver failure, AIDS, and death.

## **Okay, what about body piercing?**

Body piercing has been practiced in almost every society as far back as it is possible to trace, but it has usually been confined to the ears, mouth, and nose. The piercing of nipples and genitals is largely a modern Western phenomenon.

As with tattooing, the risk of infection following body piercing depends on who is doing the piercing, the body site being pierced, and wound care maintenance by the person who was pierced. If a bacterial infection results, it is generally better to treat the infection with an antibiotic and leave the jewelry in place to help the wound to drain and heal.

In addition to infections, the placement of jewelry in pierced body sites can lead to mechanical problems of a medical nature. Men pierced through the urethra, for example, may experience problems urinating and have a decreased urine flow. While studs in the tongue can cause speech impediments, or broken teeth, or swelling that blocks or restricts breathing.

Although nipple rings may pierce milk ducts in a woman's breast, most women remove them during the time they plan to breast feed. Milk may leak from the pierced holes, but generally the holes heal up or the woman reinserts the nipple rings because she is no longer breast-feeding.

Whatever the piercing, jewelry which is badly positioned, the wrong shape, or made of too thin a gauge metal gradually will cut through tissues and result in soreness and inflammation. Cleaning with an antiseptic solution or ointment and changing to better jewelry should produce rapid improvement.

A few people develop nickel allergies, which rule out the use of most grades of stainless steel (alloys which contain nickel and other metals), and body jewelry makers have moved towards niobium and titanium as favored materials. Pure gold is inert, but as most pieces of body jewelry need to be hard enough to hold on to a screw thread or be springy enough to stay closed, this rules out the softer, purer grades.

## **Are there any legal restrictions on tattooing or body piercing?**

In Kansas City, it is illegal to tattoo a minor under any circumstances (City Ordinance Sec. 50-239). It is also illegal to pierce the body of a minor, including ears, without prior written authorization from the person's parent or guardian (City Ordinance 50-240).