



For IR Public Health column

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Think Before You Ink To Reduce Tattoo Risks

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Every generation aims to distinguish itself as it comes of age. My fellow Baby Boomers and I embraced bellbottoms, peace signs, and long hair. Today's younger generation sports tattoos – lots of them – and the trend is especially visible now that beach weather is here!

Twenty-nine percent of Americans now have at least one tattoo, according to a Harris poll conducted last October. That's up from 21 percent just four years ago.

Among Millennials (ages 18-35), the practice is even more popular. Close to half (47 percent) have at least one tattoo, and many have several. TV shows based on the tattoo industry air on major networks, and the industry is the sixth fastest-growing business in America, according to U.S. News and World Report.

Tats Go Mainstream

Where tattoos used to be associated with soldiers, sailors, bikers, and prison inmates, celebrities like Adam Levine and Angela Jolie are now endorsing the fashion and helping it to go mainstream.

Ironically, tattoos have been around since the beginning of human history, as part of rituals and cultures across the globe. The earliest known example was found in 1991 on a mummy known as the "Iceman" that was discovered on the Italian-Austrian border. He lived around 5,200 years ago and had 57 tattoos.

Fascinating to be sure, but what does this have to do with public health?

A Risky Business

Obviously, anything that involves piercing the skin with a needle poses a risk of infection. Serious infections can require months of treatment with antibiotics or even hospitalization and surgery. Nowadays, reputable tattoo shops are careful to use sterile needles and maintain high standards of hygiene to reduce this risk.

But in recent years, the popularity of tattoos has led to increased reports of infections caused by contaminated inks. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has found some inks that have been contaminated with arsenic, heavy metals, and other potentially toxic chemicals that can cause severe allergic reactions and possibly cancer. There are reports in the scientific literature of inks made from industrial-grade colors used in printers' ink and car paint.

Getting Under Your Skin

Basically, there's no sure way to tell if tattoo ink is safe, according to the FDA. Looking at or smelling it won't offer any clues. It can be contaminated even if the container is sealed or wrapped and the label claims it's sterile. Ink can become contaminated at any point, either during manufacture or at the tattoo shop. Sometimes ink gets contaminated when non-sterile water is used to dilute the pigment.

Almost all inks contain chemicals that can cause allergic reactions, dermatologists say. They also warn that tattoos can cause flare-ups of chronic skin conditions like psoriasis and eczema and can make it harder to detect signs of skin cancer. The long-term effects of having ink under the skin are not clear.

"Anytime someone is going to inject something into their body, there are consequences," says Linda Katz, director of the FDA's Office of Cosmetics and Colors.

In the United States, regulation of tattoo businesses and artists is left to state and local governments. In Montana, the state Department of Public Health and Human Services annually inspects and licenses tattoo establishments on behalf of most counties, including Lewis and Clark. This year two county health departments, in Gallatin and Yellowstone, elected to have their own licensing and inspection programs.

Think Before You Ink

The popularity of tattoos is unlikely to wane soon. In the meantime, here are some things to consider and steps to take to minimize health risks:

- First and foremost, use a licensed tattoo shop. The business should display its license prominently as an indication that it takes required precautions to protect health and safety.
- Avoid do-it-yourself tattoo kits and tattoo removal products.
- If you have a chronic skin condition, check with a dermatologist before getting a tattoo.
- Under Montana law, tattoo artists cannot work on a person who's under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Anyone under age 18 must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian who stays throughout the entire procedure.
- Let your artist know if you have any health concerns that might affect the tattooing process. These could include diabetes, epilepsy, allergies, skin conditions, and medications.
- Avoid getting a tattoo over an existing mole.
- Ask to see the tools the artist will use. Needles should be new, sterilized, and individually packaged. By law, the artist must open commercial packaging in front of you.
- The artist should wash his or her hands and use sterile, disposable gloves and towels.

- Make sure the work area is free of anything that could cause contamination, including purses, cell phones, food, and pets. Look for telltale signs of sloppy practices, such as blood spatter, dirty work surfaces, and a lack of red sharps-disposal containers.
- Ask about the ink your artist will use and whether it contains nickel or mercury, the most common allergens. Find out whether the artist has used this particular ink before and whether it's caused any problems.
- Keep a record of the ink and its manufacturer, in cases problems develop.
- Carefully follow all after-care instructions your tattoo artist gives you.

When Good Tats Go Bad

If you develop an infection or other bad reaction to a tattoo, the FDA recommends that you contact your health-care provider. Next, notify your tattoo artist so he or she can identify and avoid the ink that was used.

Finally, report the problem to the FDA's MedWatch Program by calling 1-800-FDA-1088 or online at www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/medwatch/. The agency will investigate the complaint and, if it's confirmed, issue safety alerts and order product recalls or labeling changes to protect the public health.

The bottom line is, think before you ink. Getting a tattoo can be an eye-catching way to express yourself, but it isn't a decision that should be made lightly.