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Patient information: Tattoos and body piercings (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

How are tattoos done? — Tattoos are done with needles that inject dyes directly under the skin. The needles pierce the skin over and over again until the tattoo is completely drawn. Tattoo artists do not use anesthesia, so anyone having a tattoo must withstand the pain of the needles. The dyes that tattoo artists use are not regulated by the government. They can contain salts, metals, and lots of different chemicals. People sometimes have a bad reaction to these dyes.

How are body piercings done? — Ear piercings can be done using spring-loaded piercing guns that shoot a stud through the ear. Most other piercings are done with a hollow needle. Usually, the person doing the piercing will put the needle through the desired body part to make the hole. Then he or she will insert a piece of jewelry to keep the hole open.

Can tattoos or body piercings cause medical problems? — Yes. Each type of body art can cause its own set of problems.

People who get tattoos can get infections, including some serious infections, such as HIV (which causes AIDS), or hepatitis B or C (which cause liver disease). These infections happen because tattoo needles are not always cleaned well between uses. If you get a tattoo and the needles have not been cleaned well, the blood of the people who got tattoos before you can get injected under your skin.

People who get tattoos can also have allergic reactions to the tattoo dyes. If they ever have a test called an MRI (which creates pictures of the inside of the body), they can also have skin pain or burning during the test. That's because tattoo dyes sometimes contain metals, which heat up or move around while inside the MRI machine.

People who have body piercings can get infections either in the skin near the piercing, or infections that affect the whole body. They can also develop dental problems if they have a piercing in the tongue or lips.

Is there any way to reduce the risks of tattoos and piercings? — Yes. If you are sure you want to get a tattoo or a body piercing, here are some things you can do to reduce the risks:

- Visit a few tattoo or piercing salons and watch the artists at work. That way you can see what's involved and whether the artists are clean. Choose a salon that has been in business for a while. Do not go to stands at carnivals, flea markets, rock concerts, or other temporary locations.
- Keep in mind that most good tattoo or piercing salons will only serve people who are at least 18 years old. Most do not accept a parent's note as proof that the parent approves of the tattoo or piercing. Instead they want the parent to come to the salon with their child. If you are younger than 18, it's actually a good idea to bring your parent along. That way, he or she can make sure that the tattoo or piercing is done as safely as possible.
- Talk to other people who have had what you want done. Find out what it was like for them and ask if they have any regrets. Remember, there's no reason to do anything in a hurry. A tattoo or piercing is something you will have to live with for the rest of your life. Take your time deciding what you want to do. Whatever you do, do NOT get a tattoo or piercing when you are drunk or high. Also, do NOT get a tattoo or piercing while you are pregnant.

- Make sure you think carefully about your choice of tattoo or piercing and its location. You might want to be able to hide your body art in certain situations.
- Remember that a tattoo or piercing can cause serious pain. You will not get anesthesia while it is being done.
- If you are getting a tattoo, make sure the tattoo artist:
 - Washes his or her hands with soap and water and then puts on gloves
 - Uses sterile water (usually in specially marked bottles), NOT tap water to rinse the equipment or the area to be tattooed
 - Wipes the area to be tattooed with alcohol or iodine
 - Uses disposable cups to hold the dyes for the tattoo
 - Uses sterile needles (in individually wrapped packages that are opened in front of you)

What should I do after getting a tattoo or piercing? — The most important thing to do is to keep the area that was tattooed or pierced clean. Use soap and water to wash the area every day, but try not to touch it at other times until it heals.

If you got a piercing, do NOT use the special solutions that are sold in shopping malls and other places to clean piercings. These solutions are not good at getting rid of many bacteria, and they can even carry their own bacteria. Soap and water is a better choice.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse right away if the body part that was tattooed or pierced swells, turns red, feels hot, or starts to ooze pus or smell bad. You should also see a doctor or nurse if you get a fever.

What if I want to have my tattoo removed? — It is possible to have a tattoo removed with special lasers. But the process takes several visits, and it can cause problems of its own. It can cause the skin to change color or to get irritated or swollen. Plus it can be expensive—usually much more expensive than getting a tattoo in the first place.

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