

Tattooing and Piercing: Is Body Art Risky?

By Ann Engelland, MD

“Oh, I know, Mom, you just think that because I want a tattoo I’m going to Hell along with the Hell’s Angels or that I joined some other gang.”

“You’ve got this all wrong, Mom. Did you know that Winston Churchill’s mother had a snake tattooed around her wrist?”

“Did you know that piercing navels has been around since 4000BC in Egypt? This is nothing new. It’s perfectly safe!”

Your answer: “Is it?”

With the resurgence of Body Art in the past decade, many teens (and adults) are opting to get tattooed, pierced or even branded. As body art becomes more prevalent, it appears to be moving into the mainstream culture. A day at Jones Beach will support this observation. However, even very recent reliable research still shows –as it has in the past when tattooing and piercing were more of a “fringe” activity--that adolescents who participate in some forms of these activities are more likely to be at risk for eating disorders, drug abuse, inappropriate sexual activity and suicide. Is Body Art in and of itself risky? Or do parents and others respond to it and worry about what else may be going on?

What’s a parent to do? What information do we need? Are there some guidelines? How should a parent react to a child’s wish to tattoo or to the appearance of a nose ring at the dinner table?

This article will discuss some of the risks of tattooing and body piercing; guidelines for good care of pierced or tattooed bodies; issues about removing tattoos; and some interesting things to know about body art.

Tattooing

Tattooing is done by injecting small amounts of tattoo pigments into the skin from a series of fine needles. The pigments used are made from a combination of powders of wood, carbon and metals (iron, copper, and aluminum). The manufacture and sale of these pigments are not FDA controlled and are not approved for injection under the skin.

The tattooing process is a bloody one and the needles need to be cleaned frequently. Any disease transmitted by blood (HIV, Hepatitis B, herpes, and others) may be transmitted this way. It is important that the tattoo artist wear gloves, that the pigments come from single use containers (to minimize contamination from one client to the next) and that the tattoo artist have an autoclave and know how to properly sterilize the equipment.

People may have allergies to some of the pigments, especially the red ones, and skin testing prior to committing to a large tattoo will help prevent but not eliminate the possibility of a reaction. (Allergies can appear even years after the pigments have been injected.)

Teens may be tempted to tattoo each other using pencils, pens, ink or even mascara. This puts them at very high risk for infection not to mention unsightly and eventually unwanted body “art.”

For optimum results, any tattoo needs to be well cared for after it is applied. Reputable tattoo artists will give a sheet of instructions on caring for the skin. After all, they have a vested interest in seeing a good result. Bandaging and wound care three times a day for the first week is usually recommended. Sun exposure, swimming, sweating, and bathing for a prolonged time should be avoided for a few weeks to optimize healing.

Body Piercing

The risks associated with body piercing are in general much more significant than those associated with tattooing. Unlike tattooing, however, most body piercings are easily reversible. Only occasionally will they leave a scar or thickened skin called a keloid.

The risk of body piercing is related to the body part being altered and to the technique of the “piercer.” Areas of the body which people are now piercing include: ear and ear cartilage (the upper part of the ear), nose, navel, tongue, lips, eyebrows, nipples, and genitals.

General precautions and scrupulous skin care are necessary following any piercing. The time required for the surrounding tissues to heal completely varies from as little as 6 weeks for ear lobes and eyebrows to as much as a year for navel piercings and ear cartilage. Ear cartilage is especially prone to infection because it is a relatively “avascular” area of the body (the usual amount of blood flow which flushes away potential infection is not there.) Tongue piercings are frowned upon by dentists because of the damage caused to teeth and gums. Nipple piercings in women can interfere with milk ducts and later breast feeding.

All piercing jewelry should be made of surgical steel or solid gold. Nickel should be avoided because of the tendency to develop an allergy. It is also important that the jewelry be of sufficient length to allow for some swelling of the pierced site without constricting the blood flow.

Change your mind? Reversing tattoos-how difficult is it?

Despite some well publicized efforts on the part of charitable Los Angeles plastic surgeons to remove tattoos from gang members *gratis*, removal is a big deal. An

Australian study of tattooed teens found that 44% of them regretted having a tattoo. Most adults who seek removal from dermatologists say they do so to improve their self esteem. Sophisticated lasers are now capable of removing tattoos, but several sessions, expenses exceeding \$1000 even for a small tattoo, and residual scarring are often to be expected.

Some interesting facts about body art

At this point, blood donation is forbidden for up to one year following tattooing or piercing.

The metallic residues in the pigments of tattoos can interfere with or cause severe pain during an MRI.

Bizarrely, it has been reported that some people become addicted to body art. It is speculated that they “enjoy” the pain of the procedure or the internal endorphin release caused by the pain.

Traditional Judaism strongly disagrees with tattooing and body piercing as acts of degradation that do not honor the human body, God’s work. Adornment is permitted, but enhancement and destruction are not.

Additional Guidelines

A few basic ones:

Always consider body art permanent. Think ahead to applying for a job with the tattoo.

Check out the artist as you would a doctor. References, licenses, cleanliness, kindness, and technique should all be judged.

Never have body art applied after drinking alcohol. Alcohol will not necessarily dull the pain of the procedure and it may impair judgment, leading to unsolvable regrets.

Do not get pierced or tattooed when upset or going through a difficult period. Never do it impulsively. Allow some time to think about it and explore all the options.

More information and Resources

References from this article:

“Decorating the ‘human canvas’: Body art and your patients” by Steven Martel, MD and Jane Anderson, MD in Contemporary Pediatrics, August, 2002.

“Tattooing and High Risk Behavior in Adolescents,” in Pediatrics, December, 2002.

Internet sources:

www.safe-tattoos.com

Virtual hospital:

Vh.org/patients/IHB/Derm/tattoo

“Tattooing and Body Piercing: Decision Making for Teens” by Barbara Freyenberger