

*This information is adapted from the Alliance of Professional Tattooists (APT). Their website can be accessed at [www.safe-tattoos.com](http://www.safe-tattoos.com).*

Tattooing has increased in popularity over the last several years. It is important to be informed of the potential risks involved in getting tattoos, and take appropriate steps to protect yourself. The following questions and answers will be helpful in learning the basics of getting a safe tattoo.

### **Will I get HIV or AIDS?**

HIV is a fragile virus and does not survive long outside the human body. It is not spread through casual contact. Generally, the virus is only transmitted when sufficient quantities of highly infected blood are introduced into the body of another person. When considering getting a tattoo, ask staff at the establishment what procedures they use to prevent the spread of HIV and other blood-borne infections, such as hepatitis. Read about preventive measures in the next section.

### **What about Hepatitis?**

Hepatitis B and C, unlike HIV, are very hardy viruses that can survive for long periods outside the human body and can be transmitted through as little as a scratch with an infected needle. To combat this and any other bloodborne pathogens, artists use single service equipment or autoclave reused equipment, use individual portions of ink and lubricant, dispose of used sharps according to Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines, use Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) registered virucides to clean their stations between clients, and use barrier protections such as gloves at all times.

### **How should I choose an artist?**

OSDH licenses tattoo artists and establishments, so insure that these licenses are current. Artistic abilities vary, and this element cannot be licensed. Make every effort to find an artist whose work you like, and who will work on you safely. Ask others where they got tattooed, and about their experience. At the tattoo establishment, ask to see photographs of the artist's work, but keep in mind that the pictures may have been taken right after the procedure when redness and swelling are common. Taking time to check out a few artists and shops will ensure that you are happy with your results.

### **At the shop.**

Make sure the shop is neat and clean. What you see in the front room is a good indication of the shop's overall cleanliness. Ask questions about the shop's safety procedures. What are they doing to insure your health and well-being? The personnel should be willing and able to answer you questions. If you feel they are brushing your concerns aside or can't answer your questions, leave and seek out another shop.

### **What is single service equipment?**

All equipment should be single service if possible. This means that each needle and ink tube set is individually packaged, dated, sealed and autoclaved. The artist should open a fresh set of needles and ink tubes in front of you. Any ointments, pigments, needles, gloves, razors, plastic trays or containers used in applying your new tattoo are discarded after use.

### **What is an autoclave?**

An autoclave is the only acceptable means to sterilize reusable equipment in the tattoo shop. It is a machine that uses a combination of heat, steam and pressure to kill disease-causing organisms. If the shop does not use an autoclave, do not get tattooed there. Shops should keep regular records of their autoclave use and testing. Ask to see them if you feel uncertain.

### **Why does the artist wear gloves?**

Your artist should be wearing gloves any time they are touching broken skin and should change their gloves regularly. This protects both you and the artist from any bloodborne pathogens that may be present.

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### **What should I expect for my first tattoo experience?**

It is good to be prepared for your first tattoo. First, you should be well rested and well fed. If you are tired, or your blood sugar is low, you may be more sensitive to discomfort. Drinking alcohol before getting tattooed can cause you to become dehydrated, and increase bleeding which can affect the quality of the tattoo.

Expect to see blood. The amount varies from person to person, but usually it is about what you would expect from a scraped knee or rug burn. The level of pain also varies from person to person, but most people find it bearable. The best thing to do is just accept the discomfort and relax. Fighting or tensing will only increase your discomfort.

If you start to feel faint or a little "green," tell your artist right away instead of toughing it out. There is absolutely nothing wrong with taking a break. Your artist is prepared for this sort of thing and knows how to handle it.

If you need to change position or stretch, go to the bathroom, sneeze or wiggle for any reason, let your artist know **BEFORE** you do it.

Your new tattoo will get a patch of shiny skin over it or it may scab over. Leave the scab alone! This is a normal part of the healing process. Picking the scab may lead to infection or damage to your tattoo. The scab will slough off gradually in the course of a week or two. If you have any questions during the healing process, call your artist. Don't rely on stories told to you by your friends.

### **What should I do after I receive my tattoo to prevent problems?**

When finished, your tattoo artist will clean excess ink and body fluids from the tattooed area and then apply an ointment and bandage. The ointment soothes the skin, keeps it moist, and prevents the bandage from sticking. The bandage protects your skin and absorbs drainage.

**Ointment:** It is important to keep the area moist. Use the ointment recommended by your artist. Antibiotic ointments can cause allergic reactions, and petroleum jellies are too occlusive. Ointments containing vitamins A and D are recommended by some artists.

**Bandage:** Using plastic wrap will create an environment that can encourage infection. A cotton bandage is recommended, particularly one with a plastic film surrounding the cotton, so that the drainage can be absorbed but the dressing doesn't stick to the skin. Your tattoo artist will tell you how long to wear a bandage.

**Post-care instructions:** Your tattoo artist should give you specific verbal and printed instructions regarding post-tattoo care. Pay attention and follow these instructions completely. If you have any questions or problems during the healing process, call your artist. Don't rely on advice from people outside the tattoo industry.

Other examples of tattoo aftercare instructions can be found at:

- <http://www.safe-tattoos.com/>
- <http://tattooaftercare.org/>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/tattoos-and-piercings/MC00020>
- <http://www.tattooaftercare.net/howTo.htm>
- [http://www.city.milwaukee.gov/display/displayFile.aspx?docid=9229&filename=/Groups/healthAuthors/CEH/PDFs/Tattoo\\_aftercare.pdf](http://www.city.milwaukee.gov/display/displayFile.aspx?docid=9229&filename=/Groups/healthAuthors/CEH/PDFs/Tattoo_aftercare.pdf)

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