

# Tattooing & Your Health



Government of  
Northwest Territories

## What Is a Tattoo?

A tattoo is a permanent mark or design made on your body with pigments inserted into your skin through pricks in the skin's top layer. A needle, connected to a small machine with tubes containing dye, pierces the skin repeatedly - an action that resembles that of a sewing machine - inserting tiny ink droplets with every puncture. The procedure, which may last up to several hours for a large tattoo, causes a small amount of bleeding and a level of pain that can vary from minor to significant.

## Can Tattooing spread infections?

Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Herpes can all be transmitted through tattooing and piercing, as well as bacterial skin infections such as Streptococcus and Staphylococcus. Hepatitis B vaccine will help protect you from hepatitis B, but there is no vaccine for hepatitis C or HIV.

## So, you are thinking of getting a tattoo!

Many people think that the hardest decisions when deciding on a tattoo are the colour and design and where the tattoo should go. **WRONG!** The most important decision is who you select to perform the tattoo.

## What to Ask

- Has the tattoo artist and premises been inspected by an Environmental Health Officer?
- Do they have a current business licence?

## What To Look For

The best protection against disease and infection is to carefully choose where you obtain your tattoo or piercing. Here is a list of conditions on which to base your decision:

- The work area is clean and brightly lit.
- The shop uses instruments that are easily cleaned and sterilized, such as stainless steel.
- Tattooing is done with sterile needles in a tattoo machine that has been wiped with alcohol after each use and covered with new disposable plastic.
- Ink is dispensed into single use containers for each client.
- Ear piercing is done with a sterile needle or a gun that has a disposable sterile cartridge to hold the studs.
- New and sterile tattoo and piercing needles are used for each treatment. They should never be reused.
- Those performing the procedure have clean working habits, including washing their hands before and after procedures, after handling contaminated items, before opening and handling sterile supplies, and before putting on and after removing their gloves.
- Practitioners wear medical gloves during the procedures.
- The shop has a separate “clean zone” and a “dirty zone.”
  - The procedure should only be done in the clean zone where only sterilized packages and clean equipment are kept and used.
  - The dirty zone is the contaminated area where there is a washing sink and holding basin for disinfecting implements.

## The most important decision is who you select to perform the tattoo.

- Work surfaces are made of smooth and nonporous materials.
- All surfaces are cleaned with a solution of bleach and water.
- The shop has a sterilizing machine, preferably a steam sterilizer. Test strips are used to indicate whether the machine is operating correctly.
- Waste is disposed of properly, with blood-contaminated waste placed in plastic bags and tied before being added to the regular waste.
- Sharp implements used to pierce the skin are put into puncture-resistant containers.
- Oral and written instructions are given to clients for personal care after the procedure.

## Precautions

You can minimize your own risk of infection by taking these precautions:

- Choose a good practitioner who has received professional training.
- Ask the practitioner if she or he follows the Infection Control Guidelines for tattooing and ear/body piercing.
- Never tattoo or pierce skin that has a cut or break, pimples, warts, or other abnormalities.
- Make sure the practitioner disinfects the skin area using a skin antiseptic before the procedure.

## Personal Aftercare

- Wash your hands thoroughly before you apply lotions or ointments to the tattooed or pierced area after the procedure or when rotating the jewelry, as directed by the practitioner.

## Signs Of Infection

Signs of an infection can include:

- Inflammation or 'redness' of the site.
- Unusual soreness or pain.
- Continuing discharge of pus or matter from the site.

**IF YOU DEVELOP AN INFECTION  
SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE  
IMMEDIATELY!**

## Where can I get more information?

Call your local health centre, public health unit or medical clinic and talk to your nurse/doctor about health concerns and Tattooing.

Other resources:

Department of Health and Social Services

[www.hss.gov.nt.ca](http://www.hss.gov.nt.ca)

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contact us at 1-855-846-9601.

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