

tattooing and body piercing



Are you thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing?

Teens get tattoos or body parts pierced **for different reasons**. Most teens get a tattoo or body piercing because they like the way it looks or to express themselves. Some get a tattoo or piercing to feel like part of a group. In some states and cities, you need to be 18 or have a parent's permission to get a piercing or tattoo.

Before you decide, you should know about the **possible health risks**. And if you do decide to get a tattoo or body piercing, *it's important that it's done safely*.

How it's done

Tattoos. Ink is injected into the skin with a tattoo machine. Attached to the machine is a bar with needles that move up and down inside a tube, vibrating 50 to 3,000 times a minute. Because the **skin is punctured**, there's usually a lot of bleeding and the machine must be stopped often to wipe away the blood. It can take from 15 minutes to several sessions to get a tattoo depending on the size and detail of the tattoo. Most people say it hurts to get a tattoo.

Body piercing. A hole is made in the skin with a hollow needle. The body jewelry is then inserted into the hole. The jewelry **should be made of** surgical stainless steel, solid 14- or 18-karat gold, niobium, or titanium. It shouldn't contain nickel because it's known to cause allergic reactions. Also, jewelry should be the *right fit for the body part* pierced. For example, a tongue barbell should be long enough because the tongue will swell. Piercing guns shouldn't be used because they can't be properly sterilized.

Getting it done safely

You'll want a **professional** tattoo or body-piercing artist to do the work. And you'll want an artist who does good work and does it safely, so shop around and ask for references. **Never tattoo or pierce yourself or a friend.**

If you're younger than 18, beware of a tattoo or piercing parlor that is willing to bend the rules about age.

Safety rules should always be followed, including the following:

- A tattoo or piercing parlor should be as clean as a dentist's office! The work area should be **clean and have good lighting**.
- Equipment should be **sterilized** using a heated machine called an autoclave.
- The artist **should wash and dry his hands** and wear a new pair of gloves.
- **New needles** should be used. They should be sterilized needles and disposable. You should be able to watch the artist open the package in front of you.
- **New ink** should be used. Extra ink should never be poured back into the bottle and reused.

Caring for your tattoo

You need to take **special care** of your new tattoo in order for the dye and design to stay in place. Here are ways to care for your tattoo

- **Keep the bandage on for 12 to 24 hours** then wash with soap and warm water. All the blood and soap should be rinsed off.
- Apply an **antibiotic ointment** or fragrance-free lotion 3 times a day for a week.
- **Don't use** petroleum jelly, rubbing alcohol, or peroxide.
- **Don't allow** the tattoo to dry out or expose it to direct sunlight for 2 weeks.
- **Avoid** swimming, hot tubs, and long baths for several weeks.

Caring for your piercing

- **Always wash your hands** before touching or cleaning the pierced area. Try not to touch the jewelry too often to prevent infection.
- You will need to **clean your new piercing at least 2 times a day to help it heal**. There may be some redness or discharge for a few days. Use an *antibacterial soap*, especially for areas exposed to sweat. **Don't use alcohol** or peroxide because they will dry out your skin. Also, using iodine solution can discolor gold jewelry.
- **Pierced eyebrow**—If you wear glasses, keep your glasses clean.
- **Pierced navel**—Wear clean and loose-fitting clothing. Avoid hot tubs until the piercing heals.
- **Pierced tongue**—Rinse with antibacterial mouthwash that doesn't contain alcohol. Check the jewelry 2 times a day to make sure the ends are tight so it doesn't fall out in your mouth.

| Body part | How long it may take to heal |
|---------------|------------------------------|
| Ear cartilage | 2 months–1 year |
| Earlobe | 4–6 weeks |
| Eyebrow | 6–8 weeks |
| Genital | 2–6 months |
| Lip and cheek | 2–6 months |
| Navel | 6 months–1 year |
| Nipple | 2–6 months |
| Nostril | 2–4 months |
| Tongue | 4–6 weeks |

What could go wrong?

The following are risks of tattooing and body piercing:

- **Scars**, including large keloids (hard scars), especially with ears
- Bacterial skin *infections*
- **Allergic reactions** to dyes and metals (The pigments typically used in the dyes aren't regulated by the government.)
- **Hepatitis B and C, HIV/AIDS, and tetanus** (Hepatitis B and tetanus vaccines are available to help reduce your risk.)
- *Bleeding*
- **Torn skin**, like a ripped earlobe (Visible jewelry, including tongue studs, should be removed before you participate in sports to avoid injury.)
- **Chipping of teeth and speech problems** caused by tongue and lip rings

Also, if you are unhappy with your tattoo once you have gotten it or later regret getting a tattoo, it can be a **painful process and cost thousands of dollars to remove it.**

When to call your pediatrician

If you have any of the following symptoms, let your pediatrician know:

- *Redness, warmth, tenderness, or swelling* that is excessive or that lasts longer than a few days
- **Yellow or green discharge** or pus
- **Oozing or bleeding** that lasts longer than several days

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

The persons whose photographs are depicted in this publication are professional models. They have no relation to the issues discussed. Any characters they are portraying are fictional.

The AAP Section on Dermatology and Committee on Adolescence would like to thank the AAP NY Chapter 2 for their assistance in developing this brochure.

From your doctor

