

TATTOO REMOVAL

By: Todd E. Schlesinger, MD, FAAD

■ There may be just as many reasons for getting a tattoo removed as there were to get it placed originally. Times or life may have changed and your tattoo may be holding you back from getting a certain job or from attaining other personal goals. Other tattoos may have specific meanings, such as gang-related tattoos, or a tattoo placed out of reverence for a relationship that is no longer active.

Fortunately, there is good news for those who have unwanted body art. New laser tattoo removal techniques can eliminate your tattoo with minimal side effects.

Tattoo removal lasers work by targeting the tattoo ink in the skin, breaking up the pigment particles with a high intensity light beam. The resulting ink fragments are cleaned up by your body's immune system. Multiple treatments are required and your treatment regimen will vary depending on the size and color of your tattoo. Some tattoos can be removed in as little as two to four treatments, but some can take as many as 35 or more. The average number of sessions ranges from 5-15. You should schedule a consultation with a trained professional who can evaluate your personal situation and advise you on the treatment plan and process.

When you arrive for treatment, the general process is as follows:

- Protective eye shields or glasses will be placed over your eyes

- The laser technician may test the skin's reaction to the laser by firing a few test pulses depending on the look and feel of the skin
- Treatment begins as the laser handpiece is placed against the skin and pulses of high-energy laser light are applied. This process feels like a rubber band being snapped against the skin, but it also has been described as the feeling of a grease splatter.
- The larger the tattoo, the higher the number of pulses that will be required to remove it. At each treatment, the tattoo should become progressively lighter.
- Sometimes, a topical anesthetic cream or painkiller injections will be used to numb the skin, but some providers use a machine that produces a blast of cold air that also numbs the skin during treatment. Most patients do not require any anesthesia.
- After treatment, a topical antibiotic ointment or plain Vaseline will be applied to the area with a bandage to protect the area. An ice pack may be used to soothe the area as well.

As far as side effects go, there is a risk of infection, although that is slight. There is a risk of incomplete pigment removal with treatments and there is a very slight chance of permanent scarring. Modern lasers have virtually eliminated the risk of scarring.

Additional risks are hypopigmentation, where the treated skin is lighter than the surrounding skin, or hyperpigmentation, where the treated skin is darker than the surrounding skin exist. The risk of side

effects such as skin discoloration or texture change increase as more treatments are performed in the same area.

Thanks to newer technology, laser tattoo removal has become much more effective and much safer with little risk of scarring. Other options for removal exist such as surgical excision, dermabrasion (abrasive removal) and topical creams. Surgical options are likely to have higher risks and the creams as of yet are unproven.

Also, certain colors respond better to laser treatments than others. It is well known that blue and black inks respond particularly well and our experience has been good with reds and darker greens as well. Other colors such as pastels, flesh tones and specialty fluorescent or sparkled colors may be harder to treat.

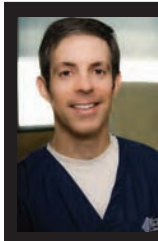
What about insurance coverage? Since tattoo application is a personal choice in most cases, the majority of insurance carriers consider the process of removal to be cosmetic and will not cover the service unless medically necessary. Most physicians or surgery centers require payment up front either the day of treatment or when scheduling treatment. It is best if you obtain a written treatment plan with the costs spelled out before starting any procedure. Of course, always choose a board certified physician with extensive experience in laser tattoo removal. ■



BEFORE



AFTER



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