Tattooing & Piercing Information Kit

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Body Piercing

What Is a Body Piercing and What Can You Expect?

A body piercing is exactly that — a piercing or puncture made in your body by a needle. After that, a piece of jewelry is inserted into the puncture. The most popular pierced body parts seem to be the ears, the nostrils, and the belly button.

If the person performing the piercing provides a safe, clean, and professional environment, this is what you should expect from getting a body part pierced:

- The area you've chosen to be pierced (except for the tongue) is cleaned with a germicidal soap (a soap that kills disease-causing bacteria and microorganisms).
- Your skin is then punctured with a very sharp, clean needle.
- The piece of jewelry, which has already been sterilized, is attached to the area.
- The person performing the piercing disposes of the needle in a special container so that there is no risk of the needle or blood touching someone else.
- The pierced area is cleaned.
- The person performing the piercing checks and adjusts the jewelry.
- The person performing the piercing gives you instructions on how to make sure your new piercing heals correctly and what to do if there is a problem.

Before You Pierce That Part

If you're thinking about getting pierced, do your research first. If you're under 18, some places won't allow you to get a piercing without a parent's consent. It's a good idea to find out what risks are involved and how best to protect yourself from infections and other complications.

Certain sites on the body can cause more problems than others — infection is a common complication of mouth and nose piercings because of the millions of bacteria that live in those areas. Tongue piercings can damage teeth over time. And tongue, cheek, and lip piercings can cause gum problems.

Studies have shown that people with certain types of heart disease might have a higher risk of developing a heart infection after body piercing. If you have a medical problem such as allergies, diabetes, skin disorders, a condition that affects your immune system, or infections — or if you are pregnant — ask your doctor if there are any special concerns you should have or precautions you should take beforehand. Also, it's not a good idea to get a body piercing if you're prone to getting keloids (an overgrowth of scar tissue in the area of the wound).
If you decide to get a body piercing:

- Make sure you're up to date with your immunizations (especially hepatitis B and tetanus).
- Plan where you will get medical care if your piercing becomes infected (signs of infection include excessive redness/tenderness around the piercing site, prolonged bleeding, pus, and change in your skin color around the piercing area).

Also, if you plan to get a tongue or mouth piercing, make sure your teeth and gums are healthy.

**Making Sure the Piercing Shop Is Safe and Sanitary**

Body piercing is regulated in some areas but not others. Although most piercing shops try to provide a clean and healthy environment, some might not take proper precautions against infections or other health hazards.

If you decide to get a body piercing, do a little investigative work about a shop's procedures and find out whether it provides a clean and safe environment for its customers. Every shop should have an autoclave (a sterilizing machine) and should keep instruments in sealed packets until they are used. Ask questions and make sure:

- the shop is clean
- the person doing the piercing washes his or her hands with a germicidal soap
- the person doing the piercing wears fresh disposable gloves (like those worn at a doctor's office)
- the person doing the piercing uses sterilized instruments or instruments that are thrown away after use
- the person doing the piercing does not use a piercing gun (they're not sterile)
- the needle being used is new and is being used for the first time
- the needle is disposed of in a special sealed container after the piercing
- there are procedures for the proper handling and disposal of waste (like needles or gauze with blood on them)

It's also a good idea to ask about the types of jewelry the shop offers because some people have allergic reactions to certain types of metals. Before you get a piercing, make sure you know if you're allergic to any metals. Only nontoxic metals should be used for body piercings, such as:

- surgical steel
- solid 14-karat or 18-karat gold
- niobium
- titanium
- platinum
If you think the shop isn't clean enough, if all your questions aren't answered, or if you feel in any way uncomfortable, go somewhere else to get your piercing.

**Some Health Risks**

If all goes well, you should be fine after a body piercing except for some temporary symptoms, including some pain, swelling at the pierced area, and in the case of a tongue piercing, increased saliva. But be aware that several things, including the following, can go wrong in some cases:

- chronic infection
- uncontrollable or prolonged bleeding
- scarring
- hepatitis B and C
- tetanus
- skin allergies to the jewelry that's used
- abscesses or boils (collections of pus that can form under your skin at the site of the piercing)
- inflammation or nerve damage

Depending on the body part, healing times can take anywhere from a few weeks to more than a year. If you do get a piercing, make sure you take good care of it afterward — don't pick or tug at it, keep the area clean with soap (not alcohol), and don't touch it without washing your hands first. Never use hydrogen peroxide because it can break down newly formed tissue. If you have a mouth piercing, use an alcohol-free, antibacterial mouthwash after eating.

If you're thinking of donating blood, be aware that some organizations won't accept blood donations from anyone who has had a body piercing or tattoo within the last year because both procedures can transmit blood-borne diseases you may not realize were passed on to you at the time of the piercing.

If your piercing doesn't heal correctly or you feel something might be wrong, it's important to get medical attention. Most important, **don't** pierce yourself or have a friend do it — make sure it's done by a professional in a safe and clean environment.
Tattoos

It seems like everyone has a tattoo these days. What used to be the property of sailors, outlaws, and biker gangs is now a popular body decoration for many people. And it's not just anchors, skulls, and battleships anymore — from school emblems to Celtic designs to personalized symbols, people have found many ways to express themselves with their tattoos. Maybe you’ve thought about getting one. But before you head down to the nearest tattoo shop and roll up your sleeve, there are a few things you need to know.

Did You Know?
Tattoos have been around for a long, long time. Throughout history, tattoos were mostly worn as decoration. They’ve been found on mummified bodies dating back to 3300BC. And it’s well known that many societies wore (and still wear) tattoos as part of their culture.

So What Exactly Is a Tattoo?
A tattoo is a puncture wound, made deep in your skin, that's filled with ink. It's made by penetrating your skin with a needle and injecting ink into the area, usually creating some sort of design. What makes tattoos so long-lasting is they're so deep — the ink isn't injected into the epidermis (the top layer of skin that you continue to produce and shed throughout your lifetime). Instead, the ink is injected into the dermis, which is the second, deeper layer of skin. Dermis cells are very stable, so the tattoo is practically permanent.

Tattoos used to be done manually — that is, the tattoo artist would puncture the skin with a needle and inject the ink by hand. Though this process is still used in some parts of the world, most tattoo shops use a tattoo machine these days. A tattoo machine is a handheld electric instrument that uses a tube and needle system. On one end is a sterilized needle, which is attached to tubes that contain ink. A foot switch is used to turn on the machine, which moves the needle in and out while driving the ink about 1/8 inch (about 3 millimeters) into your skin.

Most tattoo artists know how deep to drive the needle into your skin, but not going deep enough will produce a ragged tattoo, and going too deep can cause bleeding and intense pain. Getting a tattoo can take several hours, depending on the size and design chosen.
**Does It Hurt to Get a Tattoo?**

Getting a tattoo can hurt, but the level of pain can vary. Because getting a tattoo involves being stuck multiple times with a needle, it can feel like getting a bunch of shots or being stung by a hornet multiple times. Some people describe the tattoo sensation as "tingling." It all depends on your pain threshold, how good the person wielding the tattoo machine is, and where exactly on your body you're getting the tattoo. Also, keep in mind that you'll probably bleed a little.

**If You're Thinking About It**

If you're thinking about getting a tattoo, there is one very important thing you have to keep in mind — getting it done safely. Although it might look a whole lot cooler than a big scab, a new tattoo is also a wound. Like any other slice, scrape, puncture, cut, or penetration to your skin, a tattoo is at risk for infections and disease.

First, make sure you're up to date with your immunizations (especially hepatitis and tetanus shots) and plan where you'll get medical care if your tattoo becomes infected (signs of infection include excessive redness or tenderness around the tattoo, prolonged bleeding, pus, or changes in your skin color around the tattoo).

If you have a medical problem such as heart disease, allergies, diabetes, skin disorders, a condition that affects your immune system, or infections — or if you are pregnant — ask your doctor if there are any special concerns you should have or precautions you should take beforehand. Also, if you're prone to getting keloids (an overgrowth of scar tissue in the area of the wound), it's probably best to avoid getting a tattoo altogether.

**Avoiding Infection**

It's very important to make sure the tattoo studio is clean and safe, and that all equipment used is disposable (in the case of needles, gloves, masks, etc.) and sterilized (everything else). Some cities, and communities set up standards for tattoo studios, but others don't. You can call your county, or local health department to find out about the laws in your community, ask for inspection results on licensed tattoo shops, or check for any complaints about a particular studio.

Professional studios usually take pride in their cleanliness. Here are some things to check for:

- Make sure the tattoo studio has an **autoclave** (a device that uses steam, pressure, and heat for sterilization). You should be allowed to watch as equipment is sterilized in the autoclave.
- Check that the tattoo artist is a **licensed practitioner**. If so, the tattoo artist should be able to provide you with references.
Be sure that the tattoo studio follows the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's **Universal Precautions**. These are regulations that outline procedures to be followed when dealing with bodily fluids (in this case, blood).

If the studio looks unclean, if anything looks out of the ordinary, or if you feel in any way uncomfortable, find a better place to get your tattoo.

**What's the Procedure Like?**

Here's what you can expect from a normal tattooing procedure:

- The tattoo artist will first wash his or her hands with a germicidal soap.
- The to-be-tattooed area on your body will be cleaned and disinfected.
- The tattoo artist will put on clean, fresh gloves (and possibly a surgical mask).
- The tattoo artist will explain the sterilization procedure to you and open up the single-use, sterilized equipment (such as needles, etc.).
- Using the tattoo machine (with a sterile, single-use needle attached), the tattoo artist will begin drawing an outline of the tattoo under your skin.
- The outline will be cleaned with antiseptic soap and water.
- Sterile, thicker needles will be installed on the tattoo machine, and the tattoo artist will start shading the design. After cleaning the area again, color will be injected. A new bottle of ink should be opened for each individual.
- Any blood will be removed by a sterile, disposable cloth or towel.
- When finished, the area, now sporting a finished tattoo, will be cleaned once again and a bandage will be applied.

**Taking Care of a Tattoo**

The last step in getting a tattoo is very important — taking care of the tattoo until it fully heals. Follow all of the instructions the studio gives you for caring for your tattoo to make sure it heals properly. Also, keep in mind that it's very important to call your doctor right away if you see or feel any signs of infection such as pain, spreading redness, swelling, or drainage of pus. To make sure your tattoo heals properly:

- Keep a bandage on the area for up to 24 hours.
- Avoid touching the tattooed area and don't pick at any scabs that may form.
- Wash the tattoo with an antibacterial soap (don't use alcohol or peroxide — they'll dry out the tattoo). Use a soft towel to dry the tattoo — just pat it dry and be sure not to rub it.
- If you don't have an allergy to antibiotic ointment, rub some into the tattoo. Don't use petroleum jelly — it may cause the tattoo to fade.
- Put an ice pack on the tattooed area if you see any redness or swelling.
- Try not to get the tattoo wet until it fully heals. Stay away from pools, hot tubs, or long, hot baths.
- Keep your tattoo away from the sun until it's fully healed.
Even after it's fully healed, a tattoo is more susceptible to the sun's rays, so it's a good idea to always keep it protected from direct sunlight. If you're outside often or hang out at the beach, it's recommended that you always wear a sunscreen with a minimum sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 on the tattoo. This not only protects your skin, but keeps the tattoo from fading.

**What Are the Risks?**

If you decide to get a tattoo, chances are everything will go as planned. But if disinfection and sterilization steps aren't followed, there are some things you need to be aware of that can go wrong. If you don't go to a tattoo studio or the tattoo studio doesn't follow precautions like using sterilized equipment or if it shares ink between customers, you're putting yourself at risk for getting viral infections such as hepatitis, bacterial skin infections, or dermatitis (severe skin irritation).

Also, some people have allergic reactions to the tattoo ink. And if you already have a skin condition such as eczema, you may have flare-ups as a result of the tattoo.

Serious complications can result if you attempt to do a tattoo yourself, have a friend do it for you, or have it done in any unclean environment. Because tattooing involves injections under the skin, viruses such as HIV and hepatitis B and C can be transferred into your body if proper precautions aren't followed. For this reason, the American Red Cross and some other blood banks require people to wait 12 months after getting a tattoo before they can donate blood.

**Tattoo Removal**

A lot of people love their tattoos and keep them forever. But others decide a couple of years down the road that they really don't like that rose on their ankle or snake on their bicep anymore. Or maybe you broke up with your boyfriend or girlfriend and no longer want his or her initials on your stomach. What then?

In the past, tattoo removal required surgery, but now there are several other methods that can be used. One common method is **laser removal**. Some tattoo shops also offer tattoo removal, but it's a better idea to make sure the person doing the removal is a medical doctor. Before you go just anywhere to get your tattoo removed, check with your doctor or contact the Canadian Dermatological Association to find a reputable laser removal specialist in your area.

Although it's called tattoo removal, completely removing a tattoo can be difficult depending on how old the tattoo is, how big the tattoo is, and the types and colors of inks that were used. Removal of the entire tattoo is not always guaranteed. It's best to consult with a dermatologist who specializes in tattoo removal to get your questions answered — such as whether anesthesia is used. The dermatologist can also give you a good idea of how much (if not all) of the tattoo can be removed.
Tattoo removal can be pretty expensive. Depending on factors like the size and design of the tattoo, removal can cost significantly more than the actual tattoo.

**The Laser Removal Procedure**

Laser tattoo removal usually requires a number of visits, with each procedure lasting only a few minutes. Anesthesia may or may not be used. What happens is the laser sends short zaps of light through the top layers of your skin, with the laser's energy aimed at specific pigments in the tattoo. Those zapped pigments are then removed by your body's immune system.

Removing a tattoo by laser can be uncomfortable and can feel a lot like getting a tattoo. The entire process usually takes several months.

Just like when you get a tattoo, you must look after the wound area after a tattoo is removed. The area should be kept clean, but it shouldn't be scrubbed. Also, it might turn red for a few days and a scab might form. Don't rub or scrub the area or pick at the scab. Let it heal on its own.

Laser tattoo removal is usually effective for the most part, but there can be some side effects. The area can become infected or scarred, and it can also be susceptible to hyperpigmentation, which causes the area where your tattoo used to be to become darker than your normal skin, or hypopigmentation, which causes the area where your tattoo used to be to become lighter than your normal skin color.

**So Is It Worth It?**

Is getting a tattoo worth the money and hassle? It's up to you. Some people really enjoy their tattoos and keep them for life, whereas others might regret that they acted on impulse and didn't think enough about it before they got one. Getting a tattoo is a big deal, especially because they're designed to be permanent.

If you've thought about it and decided you want a tattoo, make sure you do a little detective work and find a clean, safe, and professional tattoo shop. Also, remember that getting and maintaining a tattoo involves some responsibility — after you leave the tattoo shop, it's up to you to protect and treat it to prevent infections or other complications.

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TATTOOING AND PIERCING

The Issue

Tattooing and ear/body piercing are increasingly popular among Canadians. These procedures, however, may increase the risk of contracting a number of serious blood-borne diseases.

Background

Tattoos and ear/body piercings are very popular, especially among those aged 18 to 22. Between 73 and 83 percent of women in the U.S. have had their ears pierced. An American university survey in 2001 found that 51 percent of students had piercings and 23 percent had tattoos. U.S. studies show that the number of women with tattoos quadrupled between 1960 and 1980. The number of tattooing and piercing shops in Canada has increased dramatically in the last few years.

Health Risks of Tattooing and Ear/Body Piercing

Skin and mucous membranes in the mouth and nose protect you from many infections. Both tattooing and ear/body piercing procedures involve piercing the skin or mucous membrane with a needle or other sharp instrument. Unless the needles are new, sterilized for each treatment and properly handled by the practitioner, instruments can be contaminated with the infected blood or bodily fluids of another person. You may also have bacteria or viruses present on your skin that can enter your body and cause infection when your skin is pierced.

Practitioners who do the tattooing and piercing are also at risk of becoming infected through accidental cuts and punctures. It is possible to transmit viral infections such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and herpes through tattooing and piercing, as well as bacterial skin infections such as Streptococcus and Staphylococcus.

Minimizing your Risk
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.
- Ear piercing is done with a sterile needle or a gun that has a disposable sterile cartridge to hold the studs.
- Tattoo and piercing needles are new and sterile 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 “clean zone” and a “dirty zone.” The procedure should 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.
- Work surfaces are made of smooth and non-porous materials.
- All surfaces are cleaned with a solution of bleach and water.
- The shop has a sterilizing machine, preferably a steam sterilizer, and 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.

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

- Choose a good professional practitioner who has been trained.
- 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.
- 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. If you are concerned that the tattoo or piercing is infected, contact your doctor or local health unit.
- Hepatitis B vaccine will help protect you from hepatitis B, but there is no vaccine for hepatitis C or HIV.

**Health Canada’s Role**

Working in partnership with the provincial and territorial governments, Health Canada has created Infection Control Guidelines for tattooing and ear/body piercing. These guidelines were developed for practitioners of tattooing and ear/body piercing by representatives from industry, health services, and Health Canada’s Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control.

**Need More Info?**

Learn more about Health Canada’s Infection Control Guidelines

Get information on hepatitis C

It's Your Health article on hepatitis C

Information on the Canadian Strategy on HIV/AIDS

Additional It’s Your Health articles

You can also call (613) 957-2991
Tattooing and Body Piercing Safety:  
Information from Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health

Is it right for me?  

When you change your body, it's a very personal decision. Before you go ahead, make sure it's right for you.

To help make your decision, ask yourself:

- Am I making this choice myself without pressure from my friends?
- Have I asked someone who has had body art for a long time—five to fifteen years—if they still like it?
- Remember, what’s popular today may not be tomorrow.
- Do I have personal health issues (metal allergies, not vaccinated against hepatitis B) that may affect my choice?
- If my tattoo/piercing is in an obvious spot and can't be hidden by clothing, will it affect my chance of getting a job in certain fields?
- Can I commit the time to care for my new tattoo/piercing?
- Should I try a temporary tattoo or henna to help me decide?

Body art is for a lifetime.

If you have any doubts, wait and get more information. Here's what you should know:

- Laser treatments can remove tattoos, but they're very expensive.
- Costs range from $150-$500 per treatment. You may need five to six treatments.
- Your skin may change colour permanently after the tattoo is removed.
Considering body art?

Protect Yourself—Find a Good Artist

A well-trained professional artist does the safest work. Safe work is done in a professional studio that is properly equipped. Avoid going to friends and people who work out of their homes—they aren't likely to be equipped or experienced enough to do safe, quality work.

Tattooing/body piercing is not a regulated profession in Ontario. This means there are not standards and licensing to ensure these individuals are knowledgeable and competent in their profession. They have to take it upon themselves to learn proper and safe procedures. Insist on seeing the needle removed from the sterile packaging before it is used on you. All other instruments must be sterile, pre-packed, and opened in front of you. Experienced tattoo/body piercing artists will be happy to show you what steps they've taken to lower the risk of spreading disease to you and to themselves and will be willing to answer all your questions.

Know the risks:

Your skin is the body's first line of defense against infections. Any time the skin is broken, there are health risks. HIV and hepatitis (B and C) are examples of serious infections you can get from unclean equipment. You should get a hepatitis B vaccination before getting a tattoo or body piercing.

How to choose a studio

Here's what to look for:

- An autoclave sterilizer is used. It's very important that artists sterilize all instruments that contact blood or body fluids. Records should show the autoclave is being tested every second week.
• A hand-washing sink, cleaners and surface disinfectants, and skin antiseptics must be available. These are used with each tattooing or body piercing procedure.
• New, sterile needles are used each time. These needles are then thrown out in a special container for disposable sharp tools.
• Only sterile, individually pre-packed instruments are used for each tattooing or body piercing procedure. They are opened in front of you.
• Disposable items such as razors, ink caps, swabs, gloves are being used and then tossed.
• Only fresh ink is used for tattooing. It is poured into disposable caps in front of you.
• The artist always wears disposable gloves and changes them after touching anything that might not be sterile.
• Only clean (if possible, sterile) dressings can cover the new tattooed or pierced area.

For information on studio inspection call Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health at 519-846-2715 or 1-800-265-7293.

**How to choose an artist**

**Here's what to look for:**

• The artist is willing to show you all areas of the studio.
• He or she confidently answers all your questions, including those about sterilization methods.
• The artist has a portfolio of his or her work available for you to see.
• The artist is not under the influence of alcohol or drugs while working on you. You shouldn't be either.
• Some drugs can cause you to bleed more and interfere with healing, as well as interfering with your good judgment.
• The artist discusses aftercare instructions with you including things that can damage your new tattoo or piercing such as sunlight, swimming, and too much handling.

**Remember:** This change you made to your body is technically an open wound—you have to treat it properly or you risk getting an infection. An infection affects your health and can ruin your new body art.
**Tattoos and piercings take time to heal.**

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<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Healing time</th>
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<td>Tattoo</td>
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<td>Piercing</td>
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<td>• earlobe</td>
<td>• six to eight weeks</td>
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<td>• eyebrow</td>
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<td>• ear cartilage and navel</td>
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<td>• three to six months</td>
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You may have an infection, if your tattoo or piercing:

- becomes more red or swollen
- feels hot to the touch
- oozes pus

Contact your doctor as soon as possible. For more information, contact Public Health at 1-800-265-7293.

*SOURCE: Public Health Wellington Dufferin Guelph*

**Tattoo Aftercare Instructions**

After getting a tattoo, be sure to take proper care of the tattoo site in order to promote proper healing, prevent infection, and preserve the final appearance of the tattoo.

- Wash hands thoroughly before touching a healing tattoo
- Remove bandage within 2 hours of application to prevent bandage from sticking to skin. Do not re-bandage tattoo.
- Gently wash off excess ointment and fluids from tattoo with clean, bare hand. Pat dry with a clean, single-use paper towel; do not rub with towel. Apply a thin layer of antibiotic ointment such as Bacitracin™ Zinc Oxide ointment, Neosporin™ of Vitamin A&D ointment. After 5 days, substitute a gentle fragrance-free and colour-free body lotion.
- Repeat the above washing/ointment procedure at least 3 times a day for 1-2 weeks
Consult with a health care provider if any signs of allergic reaction or infection appear.

Note:

- DO NOT pick, rub, scratch, or ‘help along’ the scabbing process. Some scabbing is normal. Excessive scabbing, however, may indicate a poorly done tattoo. Picking at the scabs or flakes may pull the colour out and can increase chances of infection.
- DO NOT expose tattoo to sun or a tanning bed until completely healed (at least 4 weeks). Note: After tattoo is healed, use sun block whenever exposed to the sun.
- DO NOT get the tattoo wet for 2 weeks except for gentle washing, no hot baths, hot tubs, or swimming.
- DO NOT use Hydrogen Peroxide or rubbing alcohol on your tattoo.
- DO NOT wear tight clothing or nylons over your tattoo until healed

Visit our website for more information, on tattoo and body piercings