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# Think Before You Ink



## How to Make Body Art Safe and Reversible

by April Thompson

Few things in life are more permanent than a tattoo. Yet those most likely to change their life course—in careers, relationships or fashion styles—are also most inclined to get inked. Nearly 40 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 have at least one tattoo, according to a Pew Research Center poll.

“If you change your hairstyle or look often, you probably aren’t a good candidate for a tattoo, because of the limited flexibility to change that decision,” says Dr. Gregory Hall, a primary care physician in Cleveland, Ohio. Hall created the website *ShouldITattoo.com* to help inform others after seeing so many patients that regretted the tattoos of their youth. Hall has also authored *Teens, Tattoos, & Piercings* to try to reach school-aged kids before they even consider body art.

### Career Concerns

The Millennial generation, which is getting inked in record numbers, is also the leading demographic for ink removal. More than half the tattoos removed by medical professionals in 2013 were for people between 19 and 34 years old. Removal often costs many times more than being tattooed, sometimes requiring a dozen or more sessions over several months.

Beyond the likelihood of changing one’s mind about a tattoo, Hall cites

employment, discrimination and health concerns in urging teens to decline getting inked or pierced. Employers have the legal right to reject a job candidate because of a tattoo—a challenging fact of life for young people to reconcile when they’re still undecided on a career path. Different branches of the military have their own restrictions on body art, which can include the tattoo’s size, placement and subject, while some companies ban tattoos and piercings altogether.

The commitment of a tattoo never interested Lauren Waaland-Kreutzer, 25, of Richmond, Virginia. “I don’t know how I’m going to age and who I’ll be in five years,” she says. Two days after turning 18, however, she got her nose pierced, a decision she hasn’t regretted, even though it’s affected her employment. “While I was working my way through college, I gave up slightly better paying jobs in order to keep my piercing,” she says.

Her current employer, a local nonprofit in Fredericksburg, Virginia, is piercing-friendly, but she has friends that have to cover their tattoos and piercings at work; a former classmate-turned-lawyer even had to remove a small star tattoo from her wrist.

While piercings are more reversible than tattoos, they are also more prone to certain health risks. Tongue and cheek piercings can accelerate tooth decay, according to Hall, and the risk of infection can be high, especially if it impacts cartilage. “Some skin

rejects piercings, and you can end up with permanent scars,” he adds.

## Healthier Alternatives

The good news is there are more natural, less permanent alternatives for young adults to adorn and express themselves, including custom-made temporary tattoos, plus magnetic and clip-on jewelry that are indistinguishable from a permanent piercing. Temporary tattoos work to try out the look before possibly committing.

Henna tattoos, an import from India, are another popular alternative, although Hall has seen many patients develop allergic reactions to this plant-based ink, so it's always best to test on a small spot first.

Permanent organic inks fade more over time, a downside for someone that keeps a tattoo for life, but “come off beautifully” in a removal process compared to the standard heavy metal inks, reports Hall. Also, “We just don't know yet what impact the heavy metals may have on people's immune systems down the road,” he says. “Organic inks are much safer.”

## Helpful Facts

State laws vary regarding age criteria, some allowing tattoos at any age with parental consent. Hall's tattoo website has a downloadable contract to encourage kids to talk with their parents before making a decision, regardless of the need for consent.

Name tattoos, even those of loved ones, are among the tattoos most likely to be removed later in life. Hall saw this with a young man that had the names of the grandparents that raised him tattooed on his hands. He said, “I still love them, but I'm tired of looking at them and I have got to get them off me.”

A Harris Interactive poll revealed that a third of company managers would think twice about promoting someone with tattoos or piercings—a more critical factor than how tidy their workspace is kept or the appropriateness of their attire.

*Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, of Washington, D.C., at [AprilWrites.com](http://AprilWrites.com).*

People change over time and so do symbols. A symbol that means one thing in society today can easily change. Very little is truly timeless.

~Gregory Hall

# The Toxic Truth About Tattoos

by Anya Vien

The spike in popularity of tattooing that began a couple of decades ago in America and Europe continues to spread worldwide. Those considering getting one will do well to carefully review the options and the health dangers related to traditional tattoos.

Tattoo inks contain heavy metals, and red inks often contain mercury. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved any tattoo pigments for injection into the skin. Tattoo parlors are regulated by states and municipalities, but the FDA doesn't require manufacturers to release ink ingredients. The lack of regulation is unsettling, as some 45 million Americans have been inked.

Many tattoo ink pigments are industrial-grade colors suitable for printer ink or automobile paint, and the FDA warns that it may possibly cause infections, allergic reactions, keloids (fibrous scar tissue), granulomas (response to inflammation, infection or a foreign substance) and potential

complications connected with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). The carrier solution used in tattoo inks also contains harmful substances such as denatured alcohol, methanol, anti-freeze, detergents, formaldehyde and other toxic aldehydes.

A study in the journal *Medicine* by the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, in Dallas, links commercial tattoos to the spread of hepatitis C. Dr. Robert Haley, a preventative medicine specialist and former U.S. Centers for Disease Control infection control official, comments, “We found that commercially acquired tattoos accounted for more than twice as many hepatitis C infections as injection-drug use. This means it may have been the largest single contributor to the nationwide epidemic of this form of hepatitis.”

*Anya Vien is the owner of [Living Traditionally.com](http://LivingTraditionally.com), focusing on naturally healthy and sustainable living.*