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Health Do or Don't: DIY Tattoos

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| posted by [Jenny Everett](#)

Many of us have at least flirted with the idea of getting inked. Some have gone for it (and love their tat), others chickened out, and some regret their now-dated, faded body art (in a 2006 Northwestern University survey, 24 percent percent of respondents reported that they had tattoos and 17 percent of the inked crew were considering having them removed). Regardless, one thing is for certain: We definitely wouldn't pull a Ke\$ha and DIY our tattoo. She recently told [Papermag](#):

"A friend of mine told me you can [create a tattoo] with pen ink and a safety pin and I was like, 'That's amazing. I could give tattoos at anywhere in the world at any hotel.' I saw this hot dude and I gave him a tattoo sitting in the lobby of the hotel. I was like 'Can I borrow a pen and a sewing kit?' I think I got an admirer out of that one."

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Yikes. Then there's the trend of people buying supposedly safe [DIY tattoo kits](#). We're not that brave; we're sticking (so to speak) with the pros. Even then, there's no regulation of parlors on a federal level and very little regulation on a state level, so it's up to you to be your own health inspector, according to Amy Derick, MD, a board certified dermatologist in Barrington, Ill. Here's what to consider before going under the needle:

*** Needles should come out of a sterile pouch** (with an indicator strip showing it's sealed).

The pouch itself should be kept in an "autoclave," a box that uses a steaming process to kill germs associated with blood-borne pathogens. If the parlor isn't equipped with an autoclave or, worse, keeps their "tools" in a solution (a la the nail salon), walk out. "There generally are not a lot of complications with tattoos," says Derick. "The thing is, while your odds of having a problem are low, if you do have a problem, chances are it's going to be pretty serious because we're dealing with blood and blood-borne diseases and infections."

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*** The artist MUST wear gloves.** And, if they drop anything or leave the general "sterile" area where they're working on you--say, to answer a phone or touch something that's not sterile--request that they change up their gloves. Now is not the time to be shy: There are more than 200 communicable diseases (from HIV to hepatitis) that can be transmitted via tattooing.

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* **Check out the trash.** Just like at a doctor's office, anything with bodily fluid on it--mucus, blood, etc.--MUST be thrown in a biohazard trash can. See wadded up paper towels in a regular ol' bag-lined can? Find a new parlor.

The truth about germs: Your questions answered!

* **Research the tattoo artist's rep.** Chances are, you know several people with tattoos. Ask them where they got theirs and what their experience was like. It's also totally acceptable to ask a parlor for references, or ask your personal dermatologist if he or she has heard good or bad things about a specific parlor or artist. General rule: You want someone who has been around for a while, not a new kid on the block.

Bonus: What you need to know to stay happy and healthy

* **Pick your color carefully.** All inks are not created equal. Bright colors are especially hard to remove, so it's safest to go with more neutral tones. More importantly, red ink causes the most skin allergies of any color. "If you get an allergy, it can be tough because lasering it off just sends it into your system, which makes the allergy worse. So you may have to get it cut out." Not. fun.

* **Look for red flags when it comes to cleanliness.** Number one deal-breaker: Food sitting out around the parlor. "Chances are, a place with Diet Cokes and Cheetos lying around is not following health standards to the letter," says Derick.

Tell us about your tattoo--or if you're considering getting inked. Know anyone who has gone the DIY route?

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