

# Metal in Tattoos Can Cause Health Problems

By Dr. Stephen Moleski

Tattoos are a thing. People get them all the time. But are they healthy? If you're thinking about getting a tattoo or may already have one, this article is worth reading. The FDA is seeing reports of people developing infections from contaminated inks, and even reacting to the inks themselves. There have been various recalls both in the US and in Europe on contaminated inks. Before you take the dive and get your favorite symbol embedded in your skin, there are a few things you should know about tattoo inks, and some good precautions to take to avoid adverse reactions.

Reactions can occur in various ways, and may manifest years down the road. Some more common ones are skin reactions to the inks themselves, with some colors being more offensive than others. These reactions include eczematous reactions either in the tattoo itself, or throughout the body. An eczematous reaction causes redness, swelling, and itching. Granulomatous reactions cause stiff, raised patches on the skin. These can occur in isolated spots throughout a tattoo, or can occupy an entire color. Phototoxic swelling is associated with certain colors and occurs when the tattoo is exposed to sunlight. Some reactions may even require that the tattoo be removed (which is not an inexpensive, pain-free, or guaranteed process). MRI scans can cause burning, stinging, or even redness in the tattooed area (this should be temporary).

Some individuals react to the inks because they are often derived from metals. I recommend that you know what you're putting in your body – whether that's food, supplements, medications, skin creams (yes, these get inside your body), or injections. If you're considering getting a tattoo, here is some preliminary information about ink ingredients and reactions:

Red is most commonly associated with reactions to a tattoo. Mercury is the base metal and may be recognized by the names mercury sulfide, cinnabar, vermilion, and red cinnabar. Cadmium red is also related to the metal family. Yellow ink is commonly associated with reactions and contains cadmium. Brown is made either with Venetian Red (from ferric oxide), or from cadmium salts, and is associated with phototoxic swelling upon exposure to sunlight. Blue dyes come from different cobalt salts and are notorious for deep granulomas and localized hypersensitivity reactions. The chromium in green ink can cause both localized and generalized eczematous reactions on the body. Purple and Violet are both derived from manganese and may cause granulomas. Black is usually sourced from carbon, and sensitivities are rare. Black ink and logwood are also options, and neither of these are derived from metal. White is usually achieved from titanium or zinc oxide, or from lead carbonates. These may have the potential to contain metallic derivatives.

Make sure that the parlor you want to use is reputable. You can even check with the health department to see if there have been any claims in the past against them. Here are some questions worth asking: Do they make it a habit to use Universal Precautions as performed in a physician's office? Are multi-use instruments sterilized by autoclave? Are all single-use items disposed of after each client? Does the artist wear gloves and sterilize surfaces with a viricidal/germicidal agent between clients? From an aesthetic point of view, have you checked the artist's portfolio for sharp lines and smooth edges in the designs?

They say “a diamond is forever,” but a tattoo is for a lifetime, so make sure you carefully consider the benefits and risks before you decide to get inked.

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