

Tattooing, body piercing, body art and hepatitis C

Tattooing, body piercing and other scarification procedures penetrate the skin and cause bleeding. Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. To reduce the risk of hepatitis C transmission, the equipment and the techniques used in tattooing and body piercing procedures must be completely sterile.

Deciding where to go

When deciding to get a tattoo or body piercing, many people think the hardest decision is about the design or the type of jewellery or the placement. It isn't - the most important decision is who you choose to be your tattooist or body piercer.

Body piercers and tattooists should know the potential risks, to themselves and to their clients, of infections from contaminated equipment and surroundings. A professional artist practices good hygiene, follows standard infection control procedures and will be happy to talk to you about their approach to client health and safety.

Choosing an unregistered, backyard, or home-based service to do your tattoo or piercing can put you at a higher risk of being infected with hepatitis C and other blood-borne viruses, such as HIV and hepatitis B. Unregistered operators, while cheaper in price, often lack the resources, knowledge or concern to practice standard infection control.

In Victoria, body art premises are registered through the Local Government Office of Environmental Health. The law requires proof of registration to be visible to customers. Being registered is a legal requirement, but even some registered practitioners lack the knowledge and skills to practice proper infection control.

Choosing a studio

When choosing a tattooist or body piercer check for the following:

- Look for their certificate of registration.
- Look for clean, hygienic premises. Check that benches, sinks and other work surfaces
- Ask the tattooist if they use new needles each time. If they re-use needles ask how they are sterilised. Body piercers should never re-use needles.
- Ask the practitioner to show you their autoclave (sterilisation equipment) and its maintenance and spore test records.
- Ask the practitioner about their awareness and knowledge of blood-borne viruses and infection control guidelines.
- Look for a 'sharps safe' container (for contaminated waste) located in the work area.
- Stud guns should never be used on any other part of the body except the ear lobe.

Other things to look for

Take time to observe the tattooist or body piercer at work, do they:

- Wear clean clothes.
- Thoroughly wash their hands before and after each customer.
- Wear new disposable gloves throughout the procedure, and change into new gloves after every break (e.g. answering the telephone).
- Cover their work surfaces and contact points, such as benches and lamp handles, with fresh disposable coverings for each client.
- Unwrap any tattooing equipment from sterile containers or bags.
- Open pre-packaged sterile equipment in front of clients.

- Use single-use preparation equipment including stencils, razors etc.
- Put pigments, lotions and ointments into single-use, disposable containers instead of dipping into one big container that is used for many customers.
- Clean and disinfect the skin before starting.

If a tattooist or body piercer doesn't want to discuss these matters or anything about infection control with you, then go elsewhere. Look for someone who is happy to demonstrate their concern for the health of their customers. Remember, the best practitioners sometimes aren't the cheapest, but your health and safety is worth it in the long run.

Contact your Local Government or Council offices for a list of registered practitioners in your area.

Useful contacts

Hepatitis Victoria

Hepatitis Infoline 1800 703 003
Office telephone: (03) 9380 4644
Email: info@hepvc.org.au
Web: www.hepvc.org.au

Useful publications

Healthy Body Art Brochure
Available from Hepatitis Victoria

Useful websites

www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas/regulations/hlth_guidelines.htm
Victorian Government website detailing general guidelines and specific body art industry practice.