

a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

HCV and Tattoos

Alan Franciscus, Editor-in-Chief

The transmission of HCV by tattooing practices has not been well documented, but there is a very real possibility that a person could become infected this way if precautions are not followed very carefully. Because it is harder to obtain sterile tattooing tools in prisons or on the streets, getting a tattoo in these settings carries a much greater risk of transmitting HCV.

There are regulations in most states regarding the operation of tattoo parlors. Most states prohibit tattooing of minors or restrict tattooing of minors unless written permission is obtained from the parent or guardian. Check with the local or state department of public health about regulations in your area.

The Centers for Disease Control issued the following statement on tattooing and hepatitis C on January 15th, 2005:

“Although some studies have found an association between tattooing and HCV infection in very selected populations, it is not known if these results can be generalized to the whole population. Any percutaneous exposure has the potential for transferring infectious blood and potentially transmitting bloodborne pathogens (e.g., HBV, HCV, or HIV); however, no data exist in the United States indicating that persons with exposures to tattooing alone are at increased risk for

HCV infection. For example, during the past 20 years, less than 1% of persons with newly acquired hepatitis C reported to CDC’s sentinel surveillance system gave a history of being tattooed. Further studies are needed to determine if these types of exposures, and the settings in which they occur, are risk factors for HCV infection in the United States. CDC is currently conducting a large study to evaluate tattooing as a potential risk.”

Most tattoo artists are very concerned about safety and want to make sure that a customer who receives a tattoo is protected against getting hepatitis C and other blood-borne illnesses.

We recommend only commercial tattoo parlors that practice the following precautions:

- All single use items including ointments, tattoo ink, needles, gloves, trays and any other materials that come into contact with blood should be used only once and discarded in a ‘sharps’ bin or a puncture-proof container.
- Use disposable or new needles
- Use separate ink pots
- Reusable materials should be autoclaved. An autoclave is a machine that uses a combination of steam, pressure, and heat to sterilize equipment. There is an indicator on the autoclave machine to verify that the equipment has been sterilized. The tattoo shop should keep a record of the usage and testing of the autoclave. Ask to check the records if there are any doubts about safety.
- A new set of safety gloves are used for each person. The safety gloves should be changed if there is a possibility that the tattoo artist touched any surface.
- The shop is clean and professional – floors, tables, and equipment should all appear clean and disinfected.
- Cover fresh tattoos with a dressing to prevent infection or HCV transmission.
- Properly dispose of all equipment that may have come into contact with blood; use a “sharps” bin or a puncture-proof container.
- After the tattoo procedure, the tattoo artist will disinfect the work area with an EPA approved disinfection solution.

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• *hcsPFACTsheet* •

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Executive Director
Editor-in-Chief, HCSP Publications
Alan Franciscus

Design
Paula Fener

Production
C.D. Mazoff, PhD

Contact information:
Hepatitis C Support Project
PO Box 427037
San Francisco, CA 94142-7037
alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org

The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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Check with friends for recommendations to shops that practice safe tattooing. Visit the tattoo parlor before committing to a tattoo and ask questions about safety procedures. Ask the artist or owner of the parlor if you can observe a customer getting a tattoo and check to make sure that the artist is carefully following the standard safety precautions listed above. If the artist is reluctant to answer questions about safety practices, shop around for another tattoo parlor that is more willing to talk. Another basic rule is to shop around for an artist based on their experience and knowledge and to stay away from any artist or shop that advertises "low-cost tattoos." The price of the artist should be a reflection of their experience, knowledge and artistry.

As consumers we should all be careful about safety practices and make it our responsibility to keep it safe.

Be sure to check out our complete series on HCV Treatment – Side Effect Management, which can be found at <http://www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets.asp>

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