On the Brink of Ink

Tattoo you? Prick away, Nursie sayeth, but keep it clean, spell Mom (or whoever) correctly -- but first consider a temporary.

January 1, 2001 By Greg Lugliani

Nurse, I need you!

Call me crazy, call me corny, but I want a tattoo to commemorate being head over heels in love with my new girlfriend. What health concerns should pozzies be aware of when thinking about inking?

-- Heart Belongs to Mommy

Dear Heart,

Nothing toasts Nurse's old ticker on a cold winter's day quite like hearing that AIDSy folks are catching the love bug. In this health-care provider's humble opinion, that -- not viral loads and pills -- is what life's all about. So accept my blessing, dear, and the following information.

Practiced since antiquity, skin art is bound to become the medium of the millennium. Stats on tats are few, but a 1990 U.S. study found that 5 percent of guys and 1 percent of gals sport "pieces." Increased popularity has brought a greater concern for safety: The FDA regulates needles and inks, while state and local health departments control parlors. The Alliance for Professional Tattooists (APT) also distributes guidelines to keep the body-decorating experience safe at both ends of the needle.

So take it easy, Heart. With appropriate disinfection and sterilization, health risks are remote. But let's start with the scariest: tattooing's potential to spread bloodborne disease, in particular, hepatitis. Hep B is a hardy, contagious little bugger -- spores live outside the body indefinitely and a mere .04 microliters of tainted blood can infect -- so it's the major worry of the skin-art set. Cases of tattoo-triggered hep B transmission are on the books -- New York City health authorities in 1960 found 30 cases (one fatal) and closed the parlors for nearly three decades -- but none in North America for the last 10 years. Tat stats record one hep C infection and two cases of HIV through homemade prison tattoos.

Needless to say, cleanliness counts. Once you've decided to embrace the pain, don't wimp out by failing to ask how things get sterilized or to see the APT infection-control course certificate. ("Scratchers" -- tattooists who work out of someone's kitchen -- should be avoided.) The tat artist should be vaccinated against hep B. Needles and ink tubes should be disposable or sterilized in an

FDA-regulated autoclave after each customer. Tattoo guns, pigment bottles, drawer handles, chairs, tables and the immediate floor area should be doused with disinfectant between appointments. Before the pricking starts, the artist should wash hands, don latex gloves (worn throughout the procedure) and inspect the customer's skin for open cuts. The needler should then spray the skin with antiseptic and shave the hair on the area to be inked, disposing of the razor in a sealed and labeled container. After the tat is 'too'd, the affected area should be washed with mild soap and water and smeared with antiseptic ointment. Any leftover ink should be discarded, never re-used.

Should you reveal your bad viral self? Tattoo artists generally follow universal health care practice and should assume every client is a potential Diseased Pariah, but in the parlor as in the clinic, accidental sticks do occur. Goodness gracious, when you stop to consider, it's rather like having somewhat savage safe sex, isn't it? In tattooing, as in other disclosure situations, trust your instincts on whether and when to tell.

Other likely tattoo blues: Allergic reactions to the inks' pigments -- made from organic dyes and metal oxides -- can produce swelling or itching (even years later), but serious reactions are rare. (fewer than 30 cases reported in the U.S. from 1980 to 1991). Keep the tattooed area out of the sun and use a corticosteroid cream for relief if this problem does befall your body art.

Once the bloody deed's done, it's up to you to keep it cleanest. Expect redness for the first day or two, and -- don't flip and, heavens, don't pick! -- during the first week the tattooed skin may scab and peel. Ever so gently clean with soap and water, expose it to the air when possible, and moisturize with an unscented body lotion until healing is complete, which can take up to 10 days. To avoid fading, protect the tat from direct sunlight, salt or chlorinated water for its first few weeks of life. And just in case your lover's left your life before your skin's healed, take my advice and start the blueprints for the next design. For Nurse's part, she's still ruing that long hot summer day when she had "C.G." engraved over her heart, Heart. Should she confess that she isn't contemplating removal?

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