Think Before You Ink

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Abstract: The prevalence of tattoos has increased over the past several decades. The societal shift of how tattoos are perceived has contributed to tattoo popularity and why artistry is desired. However, tattooing is not without risks. The potential health risks, psychological motivation, and perceived benefits of tattoos are topics to be considered before getting a tattoo. This article explores the risks, benefits, and reasoning behind tattoos in modern society.

While tattoos are globally and historically significant, dating back more than 5,000 years, developed countries such as the United States are seeing a significant increase in tattoo popularity. Not only has the prevalence of tattoos in the US increased, but the demographics have changed. In the past, significantly more males than females indulged in getting a tattoo, but this gap no longer exists. In comparison to Australia and European countries, the US has a higher prevalence of tattoos, by about 15%, with the peak age being adolescence 12-18 years old. Some believe this surge in tattoo interest can be linked to the invention of the electric tattoo machine. This machine has made getting tattoos considerably more convenient. With the rise in tattoo popularity, it is important to compare the health risks to the psychological motivation behind getting a tattoo as it pertains to both an individual and society as a whole.

The process of tattooing involves a needle, or sharp object, that punctures and introduces a specific pigment of ink into the skin. When tattoo machines are used, a small motor causes needles to protrude through a shaft that injects specific amounts of ink and allows for intricate designs. This ink is often labeled as “potentially hazardous,” and possibly contains harmful heavy metals, due to a lack of regulation from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). When the tattoo needle is injected, the ink enters the innermost layer of the skin, where it is absorbed by macrophages and deposited in fibroblasts. Connective tissues surrounding the fibroblasts then trap and immobilize the ink. Any blood or pigment that remains on the outer surface of the skin is consistently wiped away throughout the tattooing procedure.

Skin inflammation is a common adverse reaction, often caused by the contents of the ink, with colors presenting more complications in comparison to the commonly used black dye. In the past, improper sanitization included the use of saliva or urine to clean equipment before use, but tattooing sanitation techniques have since advanced. Laws that regulate the sanitization procedures of tattooing reside on a state and local level, but in 2012, less than fifteen states enforced strict regulations on sanitation, training, and infection control. Improper sterilization procedures are still a medical concern, specifically regarding infections. Infections can be bacterial, viral or fungal, with the latter being the most rare. Bacterial infections can range from simple to severe, depending on how deep the infection resides on the skin. Viral complications generate concern for disease outbreak due to the transmission of blood-borne pathogens. For example, in the mid-1960s New York City temporarily banned tattooing after a hepatitis B outbreak occurred due to poorly sanitized needles. Current statistics report tattooing to still be a leading cause of hepatitis B transmission.

Due to the increase in popularity of tattoos with the adolescent population, there is pressure on healthcare providers and medical authorities to warn youth about the potential risks. There has also been motivation to focus efforts on why young people choose to get a tattoo, which is an area of research that some believe is lacking. Some hypothesize that younger people have transformed the stereotype of individuals with tattoos from a negative connotation to a positive, more artistic aesthetic. Traditional stereotypes surrounding tattoos include dangerous, risk-taking, and underachieving behaviors, but recent surveys conducted in Texas high school students found more positive ones. Students viewed tattooed individuals as high achievers with no signs of dangerous or questionable activity.

Sociologists claim that getting a tattoo is an intended project used to emanate identity. Body modification is a way to show individuality and a possession of control over self-representation. In a study that looked at reasons for getting a tattoo, the ones cited most often were ‘to express myself,’ ‘because they look good,’ and ‘to be unique,’ whereas reasons that included feelings of rebellion, risk taking, or looking tough were lower on the list. Tattoos also offer a way to remember certain life events, such as dramatic changes in lifestyle, death in the family, or connections to other people. Michael Atkinson, a sociologist who has been studying the art of tattooing for many years, reported interdependence and belonging to a specific group of people or a set of values as motivating factors for tattooing. Although it may not impact a person’s overall satisfaction with life, body modification, such as tattooing, can lead to higher levels of self-esteem.

Tattooing for medical reasons is also becoming more prevalent. For example, cosmetic tattoos can aid in covering up undesired scarring or camouflage undesired body pigmentation. This can
be especially important for patients with vitiligo. Medical alert tattooing has also been of interest. For example, individuals will mark medical conditions (e.g., diabetes), list allergies, identify blood type, or even make medical requests such as “do not resuscitate” somewhere on their bodies. While these tattoos are not officially recognized by healthcare professionals, it has opened up a conversation for its potential benefit. Another medical instance where tattooing could be considered necessary is for nipple-areolar creation during breast reconstruction following a double mastectomy. Such a tattoo can be an integral part of maintaining positive mental health after undergoing such an intense and physical redefinition of the body.

Tattooing has socially advanced, becoming a form of artistic creativity, with the dedication and passion of tattoo artists as the driving force behind the contemporary shift. For this reason, there is particular emphasis on labeling the professionals as “tattoo artists” rather than “tattooists.” The artwork requested by a customer is almost always drawn by the tattoo artist, who then tries to attractively accentuate the natural curves of the person’s body. It is common for tattoo artists to also partake in other forms of art, such as drawing and sculpting.

The historical context and methods of tattooing have changed over the years. Tattoos are more socially accepted, gaining popularity with women and the younger generation. While the act of getting a tattoo has risks, ensuring the tattoo artist follows safe, sanitary guidelines continues to be important. Tattoos can improve mental health, convey a positive body image, and identify an important medical concern. There is potential for a good outcome, as long as you think before you ink!

References
