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Tattoos Can Be Fun, Just Be Sure They Are Safe

One of the more popular fashion statements in our culture today is the use of tattoos. Although the practice of tattooing dates back over 5000 years, its current resurgence has inspired men and women of all ages to add their own personal touch to some part of their bodies. However, while the prevalence of tattoos may lead one to believe this is a casual practice, there are serious health concerns to consider before getting a tattoo.

For those who may not know what tattooing entails, it is the process of permanently marking a design on the skin by repeatedly injecting small dots of ink into the deeper layers of the skin. There is often some bleeding from the injection sites, and because the skin is punctured, there is a risk of infection. Depending upon the type of tattoo (size, multiple colors, etc.) and individual differences in pain thresholds, the procedure may cause annoying discomfort to substantial pain.

The health risks associated with tattooing include:

- **blood borne diseases:** If the equipment has been contaminated with the blood of an infected person, the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control warn serious diseases like hepatitis B, hepatitis C, tetanus, tuberculosis, and even HIV can be transmitted. One recent study, conducted by the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, found 22% of the 600 participants with tattoos were infected with hepatitis C compared to only 3.5% of those without tattoos. Given that hepatitis C is a silent disease that goes undetected for years before shortening one's life expectancy by 20 – 30 years, some experts recommend that a blood test should be conducted by one's doctor after getting a tattoo.
- **skin infections:** If good hygiene is not practiced by the tattoo artist or the person getting the tattoo, local bacterial infections like a staph infection, impetigo, or cellulitis can develop. Further, the CDC has found a link between tattoos and some antibiotic-resistant bacteria that can lead to pneumonia, infections of the blood stream, and necrotizing fasciitis (a condition that destroys the flesh).
- **skin disorders:** Raised skin with excessive scarring, called keloids, or bumps called granulomas, can be caused by tattoo ink.
- **allergic reactions:** An itchy rash may develop immediately or even years later,

as the body can develop an allergy to the ink at any time.

- **MRI complications:** Although it is a fairly rare occurrence, tattooed areas may swell or burn when magnetic imaging tests are being conducted. Further, sometimes the iron oxide and heavy metal pigments in the ink interfere with the quality of the image.

In addition to these health risks, other issues arise when a person wishes to remove a tattoo. Generally, it is wise to assume when opting to get a tattoo that it will be permanent, because the various methods of removal all result in scarring and skin color variations. They are also expensive and often more painful than getting the tattoo in the first place. Laser surgery is the most effective removal method, but often requires as many as 12 treatments over one year, and then the tattoo still may not be completely erased. Dermabrasion involves sanding down the top layer of skin to a deeper level, and it often leaves a scar. Surgery can be done to cut out the tattoo and then the edges of the skin are stitched back together, but this also usually leaves a scar.

Unfortunately, there is no federal legislation regarding tattooing, and Connecticut is one of the 34 states that do not regulate tattooing. In our state, it is up to individual towns to adopt whatever ordinances they deem necessary, so tattooing remains largely unregulated. It is the responsibility of the consumer to be sure the tattoo is obtained in a safe manner. Before allowing the artist to begin, be sure he or she is properly trained and the establishment has a good reputation. Pay attention to the physical setting - is it clean? Have surfaces been disinfected? Is there an autoclave to sterilize instruments, or are disposable needles and tubes removed from a sealed package just before use and discarded after? Make sure the artist washes his or her hands before putting on gloves, and that the gloves touch nothing but the sterile instruments and your skin; the instruments should not be placed on an unsanitized surface. Find out if the artist uses small ink wells so that the ink can be poured from larger containers and then thrown out after each use. Should an infection or adverse reaction occur, be sure to seek medical attention.

Before deciding if a tattoo is right for you, visit the following web sites for further information: the Mayo Clinic, at www.MayoClinic.com, the American Academy of Dermatology at www.aad.org (866-503-7546), and the Food and Drug Administration at vm.cfsan.fda.gov (888-463-6332). Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org (860-721-2822).