



June 27, 2015 – Grand Rapids, MI

The Bottom Line on Tattoos and Skin Cancer

Based on the research to date, there doesn't appear to be a significant risk of tattoos causing skin cancer. I've explained this before in a message several years ago, but here's the gist of it: I'm sticking this issue under the heading "Reserve Judgment." When there's no statistical significance but there may be a relationship between variables, that's the statistical term that's appropriate. I know you're thinking, "Dr. Chet—50 cases. Ever! C'mon, man. What's your problem?" There are three reasons I'm reserving judgment.

First, while tattoo businesses have to be licensed by your state and your tattoo artist has to be licensed to understand blood-borne pathogens, that's it; there's no other medical training required. I think that understanding pathogens in the age of HIV and MRSA is important, but I would like tattoo artists to have a thorough understanding of the chemicals they're injecting in the body. Knowing the anatomy and physiology of skin would seem to be critical. And wouldn't it be great if they became familiar with the appearance of the various types of skin cancer? You might hear, "You're not getting any ink until you get that checked out," and that might save your life. With the increase in tattoos, there has been an increase in studios and artists, and there's no way to know if they really know the skin well or not. That bothers me.



Second, the chemicals being injected can definitely cause skin issues. I looked at the adverse effects from tattoos (1); while skin cancer may be rare, other significant adverse reactions are not. On top of that, some tainted inks have been reported. Even if the equipment is sterilized, the skin is prepped properly, and the artist wears gloves, the ink can be tainted. In one recent case, the ink was diluted with tap water which happened to contain bacteria that caused an infection. While the FDA recommends that inks be prepared under sterile conditions, it's not a mandate.

Finally, there have been no research studies to examine whether tattoos contribute to skin cancer in people who spend a lot of time in the sun; not just sunbathers and boaters, but trades that are exposed to the sun for long stretches such as roofers and landscapers. It may take 30 years to really know if there's a relationship because the increase in tattoos is so recent. With the few cases reported so far, it might not be high on anyone's research list, but it needs to be done. Maybe the researcher with the statistical acumen I talked about last week can do a little datamining on tats and skin cancer.

The Bottom Line

To tattoo or not to tattoo? It's up to you; the lack of research is why I'm reserving judgment, but here are my recommendations:

- Do your research on where to go now that you know the issues that exist with tattooing.
- Your yearly medical exam just moved up in importance because you need regular skin check-ups with an emphasis on your tattoos.

Remember the guy from the locker room I mentioned in Tuesday's message? He had an appointment scheduled with a dermatologist to get the mole and some other areas on his skin checked.

He also said one more thing; to put it in perspective, he was about 40ish. "People in my age group who got tattoos would probably never do it again because what was meaningful then most likely means nothing now. That's why I'm going to have mine removed."

Or as someone else said, "What was your favorite song ten years ago? Would you want those lyrics on your arm now?"

Nothing more I can say to that other than Paula and I are tattoo free and plan to stay that way.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

Reference: Dermatology. 2013;226(2):138-47.

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