

‘People should ... think before they ink’

Five per cent of tattoo customers will suffer serious side effects, conference told

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PAMELA FAYERMAN Sun Health Issues Reporter pfayerman@vancouversun.com Follow me on Twitter: @medicinematters Read my blog: vancouversun.com/ medicinematters



Black or green tattoos, like the one on the left, are less likely to pose health problems than those with red inks, says Dr. Daniel Barolet.

Tattoos may be common, but delegates attending the World Congress of Dermatology heard warnings Tuesday that getting inked comes with inherent medical risks — five per cent of which are serious.

Dr. Jorgen Serup, a dermatologist in Copenhagen who heads a specialized hospital clinic for patients with tattoo problems, said a third of those who get tattoos develop allergic reactions and skin sensitivities. And five per cent of tattoo customers experience serious issues — an infection or disfiguring reaction.

The range of skin reactions include blisters, cysts, ulcers and even tissue necrosis (death). Blood-borne infections may also occur as a result of needle punctures and poor hygiene. But allergies and other reactions to the ink or the preservatives in them are the most common problem, said Serup whose clinic

has treated 400 patients in the past four years for adverse effects from tattoos.

The raw materials in ink bottles may be contaminated or skin may react to the contents in the ink long after the tattoo has been done, so skin patch testing for allergies before tattooing may be of no value, he told delegates.

Red inks cause the most problems while black or green pigments are associated with the least problems. Black is also the most amenable to removal by lasers if individuals decide to try to erase them, according Dr. Daniel Barolet of Montreal.

But, he cautioned that scarring occurs in five per cent of those who get laser removal of tattoos, and it's a costly process that requires a variety of lasers and multiple visits.

Tattoos are removed by breaking up into fragments the ink that then gets eliminated from the skin two ways — through scabs that form and via the lymphatic drainage system. Swelling and blistering are both side effects of laser treatment.

“People should really think before they ink,” said Barolet.

Since pigments can be derived from metal particles or contain metal particles, Dr. Christa De Cuyper of Belgium said skin that has been inked may tingle and burn when patients get an MRI or X-ray. The metal can also interfere with the quality of the images of such tests.

Serup said cheap inks from China are infiltrating the marketplace and labelling may be poor or non-existent. Patients with unknown nickel or other allergies may suffer life-threatening reactions. One of his patients

was hospitalized many times in intensive care after suffering recurring allergic episodes to the latex gloves worn by the tattoo artist.

Although tattoos are known to be super-absorbers of ultraviolet rays, Kluger said has found no evidence that those with tattoos are any more likely to get skin cancer. But long-term data has not been collected.

Kluger said about 25 per cent of individuals who get tattoos are dissatisfied with the results immediately after leaving the shop. About 14 per cent express regret about getting a tattoo.

Epidemiological research shows that environment plays a huge role in whether an individual decides to get a tattoo, he said. Three-quarters of those who get a tattoo have friends who have them and nearly a third have close relatives who are inked.