

## TATTOOS AND BODY PIERCING

Tattooing and body piercing are popular practices in our society. If you are considering getting a tattoo or piercing, think carefully about your choice. You cannot change your mind once a tattoo is done. Talk to friends with tattoos or piercings. Did it hurt? Would they do it again?

### **Potential problems related to tattoos and body piercing include:**

- **Infection**  
Unsterile needles can spread hepatitis B and C, tetanus, and AIDS. These can lead to serious illness or death. Bacteria can cause infections at the site of the punctures. This can lead to scarring and deformity. Some sites are especially prone to infection such as the navel, tongue, and genital area.
- **Scarring**  
Even without infection, lumpy scars called keloids can form.
- **Allergic Reaction**  
Reactions to ink or metal can cause chronic inflammation and failure to heal.
- **Tongue Piercing**  
This often results in broken teeth. If the piercing hits a nerve, partial paralysis of the tongue may result. The tongue has a rich blood supply, so heavy bleeding may occur. Dramatic swelling often follows the piercing and lasts as long as two weeks, making talking or eating difficult. Tongue piercings may take as long as a year to heal. A “knot” of scar tissue often remains after the tongue piercing is removed.
- **Genital Piercing**  
Women who pierce the clitoris are at risk for blocked urine flow due to scarring. Loss of sensation to the clitoris may also occur.  
  
Scrotal piercings are especially prone to infection. Piercing through the head of the penis can damage the urethra or cause impotence. Accidental injury to the artery running along the underside of the penis can cause severe bleeding.
- **Tattoo Removal**  
This process is extremely expensive and complete removal may be impossible.

### **SELECTING A PIERCER OR TATTOOER**

- Ask about infection control. Be sure each customer has his or her own sterile needles. Ask to see the unopened package. A less desirable alternative involves autoclaving – using a machine with heat and steam under pressure to re-sterilize used needles. Boiling water is unacceptable. If there is no autoclave, go somewhere else.
- If the studio staff won't talk to you about infection control, ask to see the board of health inspection certificate.
- Work areas should be clean and well lit. Written instructions for home care should be provided.
- Be sure the piercer/tattooer washes his hands and wears clean disposable gloves. The gloves should be worn the whole time. If he touches something else (the phone, etc.) he should put on new gloves.
- Leftover tattoo ink should be thrown away; it should never be returned to the bottle. Ink should be taken directly from the bottle to your skin. The pigments used should be FDA approved.
- Jewelry for piercing should be made of steel, niobium, titanium, or solid 14K gold (not gold-plated).
- Do not have your body pierced or tattooed if you are pregnant or nursing.
- If you suspect you have an infection, call the doctor immediately.

Once your decision is made, ask yourself if you are sure. Then wait a while and ask yourself again. A tattoo can be a permanent reminder of a temporary feeling.