

EARTH TALK

Questions & Answers
About Our Environment

Dear EarthTalk: I'm interested in getting a new tattoo, but recently found out that red tattoo ink contains mercury. Is this true of other tattoo inks as well? Are there any eco-friendly alternatives?

-- John P., Racine, WA

It is true that some red inks used for permanent tattoos contain mercury, while other reds may contain different heavy metals like cadmium or iron oxide.

These metals—which give the tattoo its “permanence” in skin—have been known to cause allergic reactions, eczema and scarring, and can also cause sensitivity to mercury from other sources like dental fillings or consuming some fish.

While red causes the most problems, most other colors of standard tattoo ink are also derived from heavy metals (including lead, antimony, beryllium, chromium, cobalt nickel and arsenic) and can cause skin reactions in some people.

Helen Suh MacIntosh, a professor in environmental health at Harvard University and a columnist for the website

Treehugger, reports that as a result of a 2007 lawsuit brought by the American Environmental Safety Institute (AESI), two of the leading tattoo ink manufacturers must now place warning labels on their product containers, catalogs and websites.

These warnings explain that “inks contain many heavy metals, including lead, arsenic and others” and that the ingredients have been linked to cancer and birth defects.

Of course, exposure to mercury and other heavy metals is hardly the only risk involved with getting a tattoo.

The term tattoo itself means to puncture the skin. Tattoo ink is placed via needles into the dermis layer of the skin, where it remains permanently (although some colors will fade over time).

Some people have reported sensitivity springing up even years after they first got their tattoo; also, medical MRIs can cause tattoos to burn or sting as the heavy metals in the ink are affected by the test's magnetism.

Beyond the long-term risks of walking around with heavy metals injected into your body's largest organ (the skin), getting a tattoo in and of itself can be risky business.

If the tattoo parlor's needles and equipment aren't properly sterilized in an autoclave between customers, you could be exposing yourself to hepatitis B or C, tuberculosis, mycobacterium, syphilis, malaria, HIV or even leprosy.

“The potential risk of infectious spread from tattooing (particularly due to Hepatitis B) is high enough that it is a practice that should be avoided by pregnant women to safeguard the health of the baby [and that of the pregnant

woman herself] whose immune system is down-regulated and is much more vulnerable to these types of infection,” reports dermatologist Audrey Kunin, who runs the popular Dermadoctor website.

Dr. Kunin advises to be careful about choosing a tattoo parlor: “Make sure the place is reputable, perhaps check with the health department to see if there have been past claims against the parlor in question if you still have doubts.” She adds that since tattoos are essentially open wounds, they must be cared for properly, especially in the first few weeks, to stave off infection.

Those who want go ahead with getting a tattoo anyway despite the risks should consider steering clear of colors derived from heavy metals. Dr. Kunin reports that black might be the safest permanent tattoo ink; it is often derived from a substance called carbon black and rarely causes any kind of sensitivity issues.

If your heart is set on red in your tattoo, ask around to see if any tattoo parlors in your area are willing to work with non-metallic organic pigments that lend a red color such as carmine, scarlet lake, sandalwood or brazilwood.



(Photo courtesy of Hemera Collection, Thinkstock)

There are non-metallic alternatives available for many other popular tattoo ink shades, too.

CONTACTS: Treehugger, www.treehugger.com; Dermadoctor, www.dermadoctor.com.

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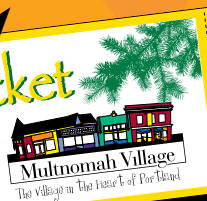
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