



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**  
**Public Health**

# Healthy Body Art



Delivering a **Healthy WA**



## What is body art?

**Tattoos, body piercing, branding, scarification, dermal anchors and three-dimensional art or body modifications such as beading** are all body art. In Western Australia the most popular forms of body art are tattoos and body piercing.

**Tattoos** are permanent designs on the skin. They are made with coloured inks put under the skin with a machine called a tattoo gun.

**Body Piercings** traditionally were limited to ears, tongues, lips – anywhere that could be pierced through. Now, however, with advancements in the piercing industry, piercings can be placed virtually anywhere.

## What you need to know

**Your body art will be as good as the artist you go to, and the way you look after it while it heals.**

If body art is not done properly you could suffer nerve damage, scarring or infections. Be sure to choose someone who has extensive experience working in the body art industry.

The Department of Health strongly recommends that any type of body art is performed by professional body artists in established studios who work with high standards of infection control. Don't be afraid to ask about their methods of infection control!

Contact the Local Government's Environmental Health Officer to check if particular studios are registered and ask when the studio was inspected last.

Body art is a very personal thing, and there are many reasons people choose it. It is important to be clear about your reasons for getting body art and to know how to get work that doesn't harm your health.

Whenever you consider any kind of body art you need to remember there is always a risk of infection.

## **Age limit and body art**

Under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* it is illegal to:

- Tattoo or brand a person under 18 years of age without written consent of the parent or legal guardian.
- Carry out intimate body piercing (nipples, genitals, anal area, perineum) on a person under 18 years of age, even if you have parental or legal guardian consent.
- Carry out non intimate body piercing (such as belly button) on a person under 18 years of age without written parental or legal guardian consent.
- Carry out piercing on the ears of a person under 16 years of age without parental or legal guardian consent.

An operator can face imprisonment or be fined for illegally branding, tattooing or piercing a minor.

## Preparing yourself for body art

A tattoo should be considered **permanent**. Although tattoos can be removed, it is expensive and your skin will never be the same, and often ink remnants still remain. **Think before you ink.**

Body piercing can also leave the skin disfigured, long after the jewellery is removed. The known risks of scarification, branding, and other body modifications are listed on the Public Health website:

[www.public.health.wa.gov.au](http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au)

Oral piercings, such as tongue studs, pose serious dental health risks. Please ask your dentist for more information.



Body artists suggest you consider these points before getting body art:

- Be as healthy as possible. If you're sick it will slow down the healing and you'll have greater risk of getting a local infection.
- Avoid alcohol for 24 hours before and after a procedure; alcohol in your bloodstream tends to increase bleeding during a procedure, and can delay the healing process.
- If you are considering multiple piercings or tattoos, start with a small one to see how you manage the procedure and its care.
- If you know you have multiple allergies, or have sensitive skin, and want a tattoo, see if the studio will do a patch test with the dyes, before you have the full procedure.
- If you are not sure where to place the tattoo or what style to get, ask the studio if they can apply a stencil of the design for you to 'wear' before you have the full procedure.
- If you want to use your own jewellery for piercing, take it to the studio the day before to be checked and sterilised. Remember, jewellery you buy from places other than body piercing studios will not be sterile and may not be of suitable quality or size. Discuss jewellery selection with your body artist.
- Remember that body art which is very noticeable may affect your chances of getting some jobs; and it may also be embarrassing in some social situations.



## Where to go

- Do not consider letting friends or people who work outside of established business premises do your body art.
- Getting body art done overseas, particularly in developing countries, is not recommended.
- Cheap is not always good. Compare prices – you need to pay for good quality work.
- Shop around – ask friends who have had good art work done who they recommend.
- Find a studio where you feel comfortable, and where staff answer all your questions.
- Select a studio that has ‘Aftercare Service’ – so you can have follow-up visits to check the work and get help for any problems.

- When choosing a body artist don't go by the art on the walls. Ask to see examples of the body artist's personal work – if they can't show you, find another studio.
- Most studios have body artists who are members of the professional associations of their industry. These require that members meet professional standards of infection control and artwork. Discuss the points raised in this pamphlet with your body artist, and ask whether they belong to professional associations or not.
- Don't be taken in by claims of studios being Department of Health approved, as this is a false claim. Studios need to be approved by local government, but this is more about standards for premises than about art technique and infection control standards.



## **Making it a comfortable experience**

If you're nervous about the procedure, there are some things you can do to feel more comfortable.

- Take a friend with you for moral support.
- On the day of the procedure make sure that you have eaten something and have had enough to drink (not alcohol) so that you are not dehydrated.
- Some procedures can be painful, but it passes quickly if there are no complications. Breathing exercises can help you relax during the procedure.
- Some people feel lightheaded or faint afterwards. This is due to a change in blood levels of adrenaline and the body's natural painkillers.
- If you know what to expect you can deal with it. Also let the body artist know how you're feeling.

## **Arriving for your procedure**

The body artist wants you to be comfortable and safe. At the same time they need to take care of their own interests and health, so there are a few things they will ask you to do, such as:

- Provide proof of your age.
- Give them your medical history, particularly any infectious skin diseases or communicable diseases you may have.

- Tell them of any metal or chemical allergies you have.
- Let them know if you have any problems with skin healing, especially if keloid scarring occurs (keloids are raised scars, more common in people with dark skin).
- Talk about the style of body art and where you want it placed.
- Tell them whether you have had alcohol or other drugs that day. Most body artists will not work on people who are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.



## Your health and safety

Make sure that the body artist:

- Knows about the current body art legislation and guidelines and can talk about it with you.
- Has a clean and tidy, well-lit studio. The body artists should be clean and tidy too.
- Washes hands at the beginning and end of the procedure, and whenever there is a need to take a break in the procedure, such as answering the phone.
- Wears new disposable gloves throughout the procedure. Once the body artist puts on gloves, nothing should be touched except your skin, the needle or tattooing machine, or the jewellery. A good body artist will change gloves many times during the course of a procedure.
- Uses sterile equipment. The body artist should be able to explain how equipment is sterilised and have a functioning steriliser on the premises.
- Assures you that any jewellery used for body piercing is **new**. Recycled jewellery can have tiny scratches, which can irritate a new piercing and cause infection.
- Uses new needles and razors and other equipment for skin penetration and throws them out immediately after being used.
- Has everything that is used to penetrate your skin in sterile, sealed bags that are opened in your presence.

- Uses preparation equipment, such as stencils and spatulas, only once.
- Transfers the tattooing inks into sterile containers and discards them following the procedure (not returning them to stock).
- Puts cleaning solutions, creams and anything else that is put on the skin onto single-use disposable containers.
- Cleans and disinfects your skin thoroughly before the skin is penetrated.
- Cleans the work areas between clients.

## Notes on ear piercing guns

**Stud guns are designed for ear lobes only. Do not allow anyone to pierce any other part of your body with a stud gun. Piercings to body parts other than the ears should be done using sterile cannulas (hollow medical needles), which are single use only.**

If you are getting your ears pierced with a stud gun, make sure it is a sterile, single use, cartridge model.

Make sure the body artist meets the same requirements as for any other body piercing.

## Cosmetic tattooing (also called permanent makeup)

Cosmetic tattooing is most commonly performed in beauty salons for eye and lip lining and may be advertised as permanent makeup rather than as tattooing.



If you are thinking of having one of these procedures, consider the following information.

- Remember cosmetic styles change and although the work will fade over time, it is a permanent procedure.
- Ensure that a new sterile needle is attached to the tattooing machine in your presence; **do not** agree to a procedure if the needle is already in place.
- Ensure that the body artist meets with the requirements set down in the health and safety section of this pamphlet.

## Temporary tattoos

Reactions to temporary tattoos and henna tattoos have been reported. People with sensitive skin or with any skin conditions such as eczema, or with known allergies, should avoid temporary tattoos including henna tattoos.

## Taking care of a new piercing

**Wash** your hands well before touching your new piercing. That goes for other people touching the piercing too.

**Use** an antibacterial cleaning solution as recommended by your body artist. Avoid alcohol-based solutions as these dry out the skin.

**Do not** share jewellery with friends, even in healed sites.

**Use** only sterile jewellery that is made of materials recommended by the operator.

**Protect** your piercing from the body fluids of other people until the site is completely healed. For oral and tongue piercings, avoid kissing and oral sex during the healing period.

**Listen** to the care advice you are given by the body artist, and follow it.

**Return** to the body artist as advised, or if having problems.



**Avoid** having sex for at least a week after a genital piercing. Check with your body artist as some genital piercings take longer to heal.

**Be aware that** you may experience tissue rejection which means the piercing site may swell, the skin colour changes and the area becomes itchy.

**See a doctor** at the first sight of infection. Do not wait until pus forms or jewellery cannot be removed.



## Taking care of a new tattoo

**Do not pick or scratch** at a new tattoo, this will slow the healing time and may lead to secondary infections.

**Do not soak** a tattoo in water or other solutions. If in frequent contact with water, use a barrier cream over the site until healed.

**Do not over-use** healing creams. Only apply when the skin feels as if it is drying out.

**Wear** loose clothing over the tattoo, or clothing that has been washed in soft detergents.

**Listen** to the care advice you are given by the body artist, and follow it.

**Return** to the body artist as advised, or if having problems.

**Have clean hands only** to touch a new tattoo; do not let others touch it until it is healed.

**Apply sunblock (SPF 15 to 30+)** to prevent fading of the tattoo.

**Avoid** swimming until healed.

**Use** the creams recommended by the studio for healing.

## About blood-borne infections

### Hepatitis C

This virus is carried in the blood and can result in long-term illness affecting the liver. The equipment used in tattooing and body piercing can pose a major risk of transmission of hepatitis C if contaminated with infected blood. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

### Hepatitis B

This virus can result in long-term illness affecting the liver and is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact and by sexual activity. A safe, effective vaccine is available.

### HIV/AIDS

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that results in the disease Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact and sexual activity. The equipment used in tattooing and body piercing, if contaminated with infected blood, can pose a risk of transmission of the virus to you. People are infected for life. As yet there is no vaccine or cure.

## Bacterial Infections

There are numerous infections that can be spread through poor hygiene practices, such as poor body artist standards or by you not following the aftercare instructions given. At worst they can be life threatening, at least, the body art you have had will be damaged.

## Approximate healing times for body art

- **Eyebrow** 6–8 weeks
- **Ear lobes** 4–6 weeks
- **Ear cartilage** 6–8 weeks
- **Nose** 8–12 weeks
- **Lip/labret** 6–8 weeks
- **Nipple** 6–8 weeks
- **Navel** 4–6 weeks
- **Genital** 4–6 weeks
- **Deep genital** 3–6 months
- **Flesh tunnels** can take 2–4 months or longer to heal depending on size and location
- **Tattoos** take approximately 2–3 weeks to heal
- **Branding** takes approximately 3–6 weeks to heal.



## **For further information contact:**

[www.public.health.wa.gov.au](http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au)

[www.getthefacts.health.wa.gov.au](http://www.getthefacts.health.wa.gov.au)

To enquire about age limits on body art contact the Department for Communities on (08) 6217 8700.

## **HepatitisWA:**

[www.hepatitiswa.com.au](http://www.hepatitiswa.com.au)

(08) 9328 8538

Toll free for country callers: 1800 800 070

[info@hepatitiswa.com.au](mailto:info@hepatitiswa.com.au)

## **Complaints**

To make a complaint or to find out further information on a specific body art studio contact the local government Environmental Health Officer where the studio is located.

## **Acknowledgements**

This pamphlet was originally produced in 1999 with input from Western Australian body artists – who are thanked for sharing their knowledge. This version was updated in 2011 by the Sexual Health and Blood-borne Virus Program, Communicable Disease Control Directorate with input from HepatitisWA and the Environmental Health Directorate.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.