

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Could Your Tattoo Make You Sick?

Doctors break down what we know.

By Korin Miller

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In the past few months, there's been a lot of buzz about whether your tattoo could make you sick. A study published in PNAS in November found that tattoo ink can end up in the lymph nodes, where it can cause inflammation. Then in an interview last month, Machine Gun Kelly told Billboard Canada that he was left with yellow skin and other health issues after doing a series of blackout tattoos. More recently, new research has raised questions about whether tattoos could be linked to a higher risk of certain cancers.

All of this begs the question: could your tattoo actually make you sick? Here's what dermatologists want you to know about the existing research.

Meet the experts: Ife J. Rodney, MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics; Suzanne Sirota Rozenberg, DO, chief of dermatology at Episcopal Health Services; and Gary Goldenberg, MD, a dermatologist practicing in New York City and an assistant professor of dermatology and pathology at The Icahn Sinai School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

What do the studies say?

It's important to stress that research into this is ongoing. Still, some observational studies have reported an association between tattoos and skin cancer.

In one 2025 Danish twin study published in BMC Public Health, researchers found that tattooed participants had a 1.62-fold higher risk of skin cancer. They also found that tattoos larger than the palm of the hand were tied to a larger risk of lymphoma, too. But keep in mind this is an association—it didn't prove that having tattoos caused cancer.

Still, there are some things about tattoos that may—in theory—raise the risk of cancer, according to Gary Goldenberg, MD, a dermatologist practicing in New York City and an assistant professor of dermatology and pathology at The Icahn Sinai School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

"Tattoo pigment triggers an immune response with local inflammation and can even spread to local lymph nodes, causing inflammation there," he says. Beyond the immune response, there's also the tattoo ink itself, which can contain heavy metals and break down into aromatic amines and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons—all of which are carcinogens, he says.

There's also the explanation that tattoos may make it more difficult to notice skin changes, says Ife J. Rodney, MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics. "In people who have very dark or large tattoos, it can make it more difficult for your dermatologist or you to identify new or changing moles on the skin because the tattoo obscures the skin," she says. "That is an issue we come into quite frequently." Suzanne Sirota Rozenberg, DO, chief of dermatology at Episcopal Health Services, agrees. "A new skin cancer doesn't arise from the tattoo, but it doesn't mean it can't arise within it," she says.

How to monitor your tattoo for a reaction

Allergic reactions are always a potential issue with tattoos, especially if your new tattoo features red and orange shades, says Dr. Rodney.

If you have persistent itching, swelling, redness, or nodules on your skin, it's important to contact a dermatologist. "These reactions can be acute—immediately after a tattoo—or delayed weeks or months," Dr. Goldenberg says. "These reactions can happen from new or old tattoos."

If you don't feel well and you're not sure what's causing it, it's important to see a healthcare provider for an evaluation, whether or not you have a tattoo. As of now, there's no solid proof that tattoos cause cancer or systemic illnesses, Dr. Rodney says.

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