

I got my first tattoo when I was 17 years old. Technically I've had three more, only they were all on the same arm in the same spot. I've gotten cover-ups. I've used Wrecking Balm and had tattoo laser surgery. Pretty much anything you could do with a tattoo, I've had happen to me so this guide is to help those who are interested in getting their first tattoo or wonder about removing a tattoo.



Photo credit: Shamontiel L. Vaughn

1. Does getting a tattoo hurt?

If you were only given a choice of getting punched in the ribs or punched in your love handle, which would you choose? Chances are you're going to choose the fatty area because it'll hurt less, right? That's about how tattoos work. The closer to a bone or a muscle you get, the more it's going to hurt. However, the level of pain depends on the person. Some people can handle pain well while others cry when someone pinches them. It's as unpredictable as childbirth. Some women go in and the kid slides right out while others are hollering for hours or days.



Photo credit: Shamontiel L. Vaughn

2. What does getting a tattoo feel like?

I got my tattoo on my right arm in a fairly meaty area. I wouldn't describe getting a tattoo as something that hurts. It's just really annoying and uncomfortable. It feels like someone tapping you with her fingernail to get your attention, but this person just won't stop. You kind of want to smack the finger away, but you know that's a terrible idea so you just grin and bear it. Bring something to distract you, like music or a book or watch TV. Make sure to glance over every once in awhile to confirm the tattoo artist isn't giving you some tattoo you didn't ask for. My tattoo artist scared me when he asked, "How do you spell 'write'? Is it r-i-g-h-t?" That question alone made me examine the tattoo repeatedly to make sure this guy didn't have a typo on my arm.

3. Where should I get my tattoo?

I got my tattoo in the upper area of my arm so if I wore long sleeves or even half sleeves, you'd never know I had it. But in the summer months at work when I wanted to wear sleeveless blouses or summer dresses, I really regretted getting the tattoo on my arm. When you're in high school, it's big fun to ignore every last shirt in your closet with sleeves. In the corporate world, it's too much trouble to hide the tattoo. Consider your career field and decide from there. Lil' Wayne having tattoos on his eyes is not going to hurt his album sales. Lil' Wayne trying to be your gynecologist probably would though.



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4. Different tattoo artists have told me to use Neosporin, Polysporin or Vaseline. Which one should I use?

I've used all three and never had a problem with any of them. However, some people are allergic to Neosporin and use Polysporin as an alternative. Some tattoo artists want you to avoid using Vaseline because it tends to stick to paper towels and it's not really a healing product. A tattoo is a sore, a decorative sore but still a sore. I'd suggest testing Neosporin on a small area first. If there's any itchiness or irritability, switch to Polysporin.

5. Can I use another alternative like cocoa butter or aloe vera instead?

Stick to whatever your tattoo artist tells you to use unless you're allergic to it. While other products like cocoa butter and aloe vera may be used on sores and as a moisturizer, if you happen to scratch the tattooed area or have an allergic reaction to these products, you're going to have quite an argument on your hands when you go back admitting you used something else. The tattoo artist may be less sympathetic about fixing the tattoo if you went against his or her instructions.



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6. I want to get a tattoo covered up. Can I go to the same tattoo artist?

Be very careful about assuming that since your tattoo artist can do a tattoo on clean skin that your tattoo artist is equipped to do cover-ups. I found out the hard way that my tattoo artist was just fine at giving me a tattoo and doing add-ons, but he didn't have a clue how to cover up darker colors. The darker your skin is, the darker the cover-up has to be in order to hide the previous tattoo. For example, I wanted to cover up two people on my arm and replace it with an open book that said "Live to Write." By the time my tattoo artist was done supposedly covering up my tattoo, it looked like two people inside of an open book because the brown that was used was not dark enough to cover up the people. Look at previous cover-ups your tattoo artist has done before you agree to letting him do a cover-up tattoo.



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7. Does it matter whether I go to a tattoo artist that's a different race than me?

This can matter a great deal. When I got a second cover-up to fix the piss poor job my first tattoo artist did, I went to a white guy. I asked him had he ever done tattoos on black people before, and he said, "A couple, but I know what I'm doing." However, this guy had no idea what cocoa butter was and didn't seem to understand that trying to add blue on my arm was turning the color to black.



Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

Lighter skin shows bright colors better. The more blue he added, the more the open book started to look like a Bible. He swore up and down that after a week or two, the colors would settle and I would be able to see the blue on my arm. Because his clientele was mainly white or light-skinned people, he was used to the colors showing up immediately and was confused about why it wouldn't work on my skin. Two years later, you still can't tell the book is supposed to have blue inside it.

8. Is it possible to fix a cover-up with another cover-up?

Yes, but most of the time it looks really clumsy. Before you get another tattoo or a cover-up, you must wait until the first tattoo heals. Otherwise you'll end up with a keloid in the tattoo area. After I got the tattoo of the open book with the two people still showing on my arm (mentioned in #6), I went to a new cover-up artist (mentioned in #7). He covered up the people by putting the Chicago skyline inside the book. The blue that was supposedly going to appear was the sky above the skyline. If I had avoided the blue that the second guy was determined to put on my arm, the tattoo would've been fine and you would be able to tell it was a skyline. If I could do it all over again, I would've been more firm about not having blue on my arm because afterwards, people kept asking me if I had an open Bible on my arm.



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9. How do I know if I have a good tattoo artist or cover-up artist?

Ask for samples. Everybody who claims they can do tattoos doesn't necessarily do them well. Would you believe somebody if he told you he could sing but you'd never heard a song? Treat the tattoo artist the same way. Ask for samples and specify samples that are related to whatever you want your tattoo to look like. Sometimes you may not like the tattoo artist's work regardless of whether he's good or not. Your tattoo artist should draw the tattoo first so you can make any last minute changes or specify the tattoo size. After the drawing is finalized, only then should the tattoo needles come out. Make sure that the needles are not used. They should come out of secure, hygienic packaging. When your tattoo artist switches colors, the needles should be put in clean, distilled water.

10. Does Wrecking Balm work?

After the fiasco with one tattoo, one add-on and two cover-ups, I was just tired of the tattoo altogether and ordered Wrecking Balm. There is a 60-day free trial so I used it for 60 days. While it does feel like it's doing something, I saw absolutely no noticeable differences. I returned mine and got a full refund because I chose to get laser surgery instead, so I cannot confirm whether it works or not. But it feels like rubbing sandpaper on your arm and I wanted something more immediate. Wrecking Balm is an honest company that does give a prompt refund so I'd recommend giving it a shot if you have the patience.

11. Does tattoo laser surgery hurt?

Absolutely! Removing tattoo hurts far more than getting a tattoo and feels like the sting of someone popping you with rubber bands. I chose not to get anesthesia because I was already paying \$300 per session. The anesthesia shot was \$25 more. I wanted to know if I could deal with the pain, and I found out I could. It's incredibly surprising to have a laser touch your skin. The first time I got tattoo laser surgery, the doctor used a very low voltage for two reasons 1) the darker the skin is the more likely it may leave light spots 2) to prepare me for how tattoo laser surgery without anesthesia was going to feel. The first time hurt. The second time hurt like hell because he used a higher voltage. As soon as the doctor stopped the first time, the pain stopped. The second time, however, my arm felt a little numb in that area and I made the mistake of falling asleep on that arm. I woke up and my arm felt like dead weight. It just fell to my side. I was terrified. I thought I'd lost all the feeling in my arm, but seconds later, it went right back to normal. By the third and fourth surgery, it still hurt but I got used to it and there were no more numbing moments.

12. What happens during and after you get tattoo laser surgery?

Your surgeon will require you to wear goggles and an apron product for safety reasons, but I did look over to see what was going on. The laser uses short pulses of light to break up the tattoo, and you can see the ink dancing around a little bit as it's being used. It feels like someone popping you with hundreds of rubber bands all at one time. It's fascinating to watch the ink come up right in front of your eyes, but it's really the pigment breaking up into smaller parts.



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Afterward, the tattooed area will be covered with a telfa pad or a non-stick bandage, and the doctor may use a net or ace wrap to hold it in place. Do not use bandage tape because it can leave a mark, irritate the skin and if you're in the heat, you can end up with a dark mark where the bandage is. It'll look like someone who has tanned with sunglasses on and give you an ugly raccoon appearance in the area that was covered. The tattooed area should be washed twice daily with antibacterial soap (liquid Dial is recommended) using only your finger pads, blotted dry with a clean towel, Vaseline or Polysporin added to the area, covered with a telfa pad and bandage net or loose gauze over the telfa pad. Continue this process for seven days, two times per day. Continue cleaning the tattoo twice daily, and do not pick at the tattoo. Apply cocoa butter on it three times a day so it won't leave a scab. The tattoo is going to be very ugly in those first few days, and you may have what looks like several large bumps where the skin has flamed up. They should go away within a few days. If they're still there after a week, call your laser surgeon a.s.a.p.

13. I think I have a keloid on my arm after I got tattoo laser surgery. How do I know?

A tattoo is meant to be permanent, so when a surgeon uses a laser to pop through the top layers of the skin, that skin will be affected. It will feel rough like leather. You may have bumps that look like keloids. However, those should not last more than a few days. I had them the first three times, and while washing the area with the pads of my fingers, blood and puss slowly oozed out of them. How sexy is that? After the first time, it's not as much of a shocker and you'll be able to identify when something is wrong. If you have any questions, contact your surgeon. It wouldn't hurt to keep a camera on-hand so you can send a photo to your laser surgeon for him or her to see it instead of constantly coming into the office. But if you really feel like something is wrong, you have every right to ask about it.

14. Red bumps or hives are appearing on my arm when I use Neosporin or Polysporin. What do I do now?

Stop using these ointments immediately. Let your laser surgeon know your reaction to it and use Vaseline instead.

15. How long does it take for the affected area to go back to normal?

It depends on how large the area is and how much voltage was used with this tattoo. It also depends on how well you clean it and if you avoid scratching or rubbing the area. Again, do not use sticky bandages or gauze directly on the tattooed area because the tattoo will stick to the material.



Photo credit: Pixabay

16. I know someone who said her tattoo came off after only a couple tattoo laser surgeries, but I was told my tattoo would take a bunch of sessions. Why?

A tattoo is not meant to be put on, come off, put on and come off. The whole point is for it to be permanent. If you go to a professional tattoo artist, it's going to be that much harder to get rid of that tattoo. Prison tattoos or amateur tattoos tend to come off much easier because the supplies used don't usually go under the first layer of skin. A professional tattoo is supposed to go into the second layer of skin (dermis), which means in order for the tattoo to be removed, the tattoo pigment has to be broken up into smaller parts. The laser basically "pushes" the ink out of your arm through your immune system, but this can take time.



Photo credit: Pixabay

17. How much money is tattoo laser surgery?

There is no hard, fast price. I did some comparison shopping and was told three different prices by three different people, from \$250 to \$275 to \$300 for each session. However, my surgeons were all inspecting four tattoos in one spot so they knew this was going to be a difficult tattoo to remove. Location may affect price, too.

18. I'm scared to get a tattoo. I want one, but I don't want to get it removed later. What should I do?

If you're hesitant to get a tattoo, don't get one. Wait until you are 100 percent ready. If you can find a temporary tattoo that resembles the tattoo you want, use that. If you can get to a henna artist who can give you a temporary tattoo, take advantage of her. Walk around with the temporary tattoos or henna tattoos for a couple weeks and examine the tattoo. After a couple weeks, do you still want it? Is it now overrated? Are you bored with the idea? If you're still excited about getting the tattoo, go for it. If not, wait until you find a design you really want to have permanently or just don't get a tattoo at all.



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19. Why do some people bleed while getting a tattoo and others don't?

There may be minor bleeding from the tattoo needle poking you, but it shouldn't be splashing all over the room. The only time there's a lot of bleeding is when someone has been drinking alcohol or taken aspirin beforehand. These products thin blood and can make for a messy experience. Can a tattoo artist do the tattoo anyway? Yes, but would you rather a tattoo artist be able to fully see the tattoo the entire time he's creating it or constantly wiping blood away while he's trying to work? Keep in mind you want to be able to see this tattoo as it's being done, too. If blood is running down the tattooed area while the tattoo artist is trying to see the ink, this can make for a mess and increase an accident. Some tattoo artists will flat out refuse to do the tattoo if it gets too bad.

20. How do I know if my tattoo artist or cover-up artist is legitimate?

Ask for documentation proving your tattoo artist is licensed. Research the company beforehand. Tattoo parties are common, but research the tattoo artist before you get there. If you're going to someone's home who does tattoos, be very weary. Look for examples of tattoos this person has completed. Ask for references. Treat a tattoo artist the way you would a doctor, and make sure you check out the neighborhood, too. With my first tattoo artist, his heat was off and he had two pitbulls in the basement. Although he was a pretty polite guy (who didn't know what the hell he was doing when it came to cover-ups) and I don't mind dogs, I started shaking because it got pretty cold in the

location we were in. But he was already halfway through the tattoo so I couldn't very well stop. By the time he was done though, my teeth were chattering.

** This post has been republished from its original interview date on January 24, 2014 on Shamontiel's Chicago Black Hair & Health Examiner column.*