

Tattoo Regret? No Problem with New Technology

By Wendy Lewis, Beauty and Skincare Columnist

Apr 1, 2013 - 9:13:27 AM



(HealthNewsDigest.com) - Getting your fiancee's name tattooed on your lower back seemed like such a great idea at the time, but then again, you really thought you would marry him back then.

You are not alone. Past surveys suggest that almost one-quarter of U.S. students have one or more tattoos, and that half of them will want it gone at some point.

Tattoo regret is common and is increasing steadily as more and more people get inked. In an unofficial survey of Harvard University chemistry undergrads, more than 50 percent had tattoos. "If you are in a room and you don't have a tattoo, you are in the minority," says Jeffrey Dover, MD, a dermatologist at Skincare Physicians of Chestnut Hill, MA, and incoming President of the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery.

Likewise, tattoo parlors are popping up across the map, and celebrities sport their tattoos like fine jewelry on the Red Carpet. Tattooing has become fodder for a whole new reality TV genre that includes shows like *Inkmaster*, *Miami Ink* and *LA Ink*. The dark side of the tattoo industry is uncovered in a new show, *Tattoo Nightmares*, which portrays the horror stories of disfiguring tattoos and peoples' attempts at fixing them.

"Tattoos are not only permanent, they can't be edited or changed," says Dover. Some people have day-after-tattoo regret meaning that maybe they drank too much at a bachelor party and woke with a serpent on their ankle, but in truth, those 'mistakes' are few and far between, says Dover. More common are people who are now in their late 20s, 30s and 40s who want to get rid of any signs of past indiscretions as they embark on their future career. Tattoos and job interviews don't mix, he says.

The good news is that tattoo removal is improving. For years, this process involved a seemingly endless chain of treatments that were painful and yielded mixed results. But a new tattoo-removal technology in the Picosure® from Cynosure (<http://www.cynosure.com>) is a welcome game changer that has been 25 years in the making.

In the past, options included salabrasion (where salt is rubbed on the tattoo until it bleeds), dermabrasion using a diamond burr, serial excision to remove the tattoo with surgery, and use of an ablative CO2 laser. None of these methods were pleasant or fail-safe. The advent of the Q-switched laser was an improvement, but the Picosure takes these gains and runs with them. "Instead of breaking down pigments from big to small like the Q-switched laser, the Picosure turns them to dust," Dover says.

It does hurt, but topical anesthesia is always recommended. "There is some downtime after treatment," he says. Expect some oozing, crusting and bleeding after each treatment, which is similar to Q-switched Alexandrite lasers. The typical protocol is three or more treatment sessions, spaces six to eight weeks apart, and the longer, the better. Dover also says that it is safest and most effective on skin types I - IV.

But it does work and it works well especially on notoriously hard-to-treat tattoo colors such as blues and greens, he says. "It is revolutionary. It works twice as fast at clearing tattoos."

The downside may be the laser's expense, which is considerably higher than anything else on the market to date. For that reason, you won't see the Picosure everywhere. It will likely cost more per treatment (\$400 - 800 each approximately), with prices varying across the U.S., but fewer treatments are needed for removal. For example, it used to take 10 to 15 or more treatments with the Q-switched alexandrite laser to get rid of green or blue ink, but Picosure may get the job done in just three treatments. The math works out in your favor. Picosure may also help erase benign pigmented lesions including sun spots and café au lait marks, and we will likely hear more about what it can do in the near future.

For dermatologists, tattoo parlors are the new tanning parlors; they recommend avoiding them entirely. According to New York City dermatologist Judith Hellman, "Complete tattoo removal has been very difficult, and multiple treatment sessions are always required. Factors that may contribute to the poor response of a tattoo are usually related to pigment characteristics and the laser energy used. The number of treatments depend on the amount and type of ink used, and the depth of the ink in the skin. In some cases, the darker the ink, the easier it can be to remove because the laser can target the ink better. If you are not sure you want something permanent, don't get a tattoo."