

Most Teens Don't Stop to Think About Tattoo-Removal Risks

March 3 2010, By Carl Sherman

(PhysOrg.com) -- Many adolescents think about getting tattoos, but less than half know what's involved in having them removed, according to an Italian study appearing online in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

When surveyed, forty percent of 4,277 secondary school students, ages 14 to 22, in the Veneto region of Italy were aware of the difficulties of tattoo removal. Those who were interested in or eager to be tattooed, or who already had [tattoos](#), were more knowledgeable but still less than fully informed —57 percent and 53 percent, respectively — said Luca Cegolon, M.D., of the department of environmental medicine and public health at the University of Padua.

“Health education should emphasize that removing a tattoo is costly, painful and not always esthetically satisfying,” he said.

The study, which was unusual in that it surveyed younger adolescents, most of whom had not yet been tattooed, found that males particularly were unlikely to understand the implications of tattoo removal, 28 percent compared with 47 percent for females, and that ignorance was more widespread among children of younger fathers than those whose fathers were older than 49.

Cegolon noted that among the 6 percent of those surveyed who already had tattoos, the majority was male and a “striking” proportion of these — nearly half — were under 18 years old. “Health education should be proactive, not reactive,” he said. “Adolescents, particularly males, need

to be told about the consequences of body modification before it is already done.”

Moreover, his findings suggest that “health education should involve the father, who appears to be influential in respect to decisions about body art,” he said.

If a similar study were done in the United States, “I think we’d have different findings,” said body art researcher Myrna Armstrong, Ed.D., of Texas Tech University, in Lubbock. “I think adolescents here know more about body art and I expect they would know more about removal.”

All the same, “I don’t think they truly appreciate the amount of time it takes to get a tattoo removed and what it costs, or that removal may not be 100 percent successful,” she said.

About 25 percent of U.S. young adults have tattoos, and she estimated that 18 percent of high school students do as well.

They get tattoos because “it makes them feel good, special and unique,” and her own research suggests that similar identity issues motivate their removal, Armstrong said.

To her knowledge, U.S. health education about tattoos generally covers the removal process. “But in reality, when most people get a tattoo they can’t conceive they’d ever want to be rid of it,” she said.

More information: Cegolon, L. Awareness of the implications of tattoo removal among 4,277 Italian secondary school adolescents. J Adolesc Health online, 2010.

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