

Regret your tattoo? Here's advice on how to get rid of it

July 31 2019, by Linda A. Johnson



This combination of undated photos provided by Dr. Paul Friedman in July 2019 shows the back of patient Ryan Tucker before and after a series of laser tattoo removal procedures in Houston. Friedman, a spokesman for the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, says people of all ages are seeking removals, but he's seen an increase among millennials. The medical group estimates its members performed 85,000 tattoo removals in 2017, the latest data available, but that doesn't include other medical workers remove them. (Dr. Paul Friedman via AP)

Does your tattoo sport your old flame's name? Or the one you got on a whim no longer fits your image?

You're not alone. Many people have "tattoo regret" and are opting to get the ink removed.

Nearly 3 in 10 U.S. adults have one or more tattoos and 25% want them removed, according to Dr. Paul M. Friedman, director of the Dermatology & Laser Surgery Center in Houston and New York.

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Dermatologists say the newest [laser](#) equipment can eliminate most tattoos without scarring, but be prepared for a long, expensive process. Insurance won't cover it.

Tattoos can be removed three ways:

—Laser removal, generally the preferred method. The laser sends lights

pulses of different wavelengths for each color for fractions of a second. The pulses break apart skin cells and rupture the ink inside them into tiny particles, which the lymph system picks up and the body gradually excretes. Local anesthetic is given to prevent pain.

This usually produces the best result, but takes four to 10 sessions, depending on the tattoo's size and colors, the patient's skin tone and other factors. Each session can run about \$450 for a small tattoo to \$1,000 for a large one.

—Dermabrasion, or scraping away the skin's top layers. It can leave big scars and not remove all the ink, says Dr. Eric F. Bernstein, director of the Mainline Center for Laser Surgery in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia.

—Surgical removal, or cutting out top layers of skin. This can also leave scars, but can be a good option for small tattoos or if the tattoo inks have caused an allergic reaction and need to be removed quickly, Bernstein adds.

"Wait till you can do it the right way," recommends Bernstein, past president of the American Society for Laser Medicine & Surgery. "If you try to do something on the cheap, you take a fixable problem and turn it into an unfixable problem with a big scar."

Ryan Tucker, a firefighter who lives in the Houston suburb of Pearland, Texas, spent about \$6,000 over 10 laser treatments to have Friedman remove a tattoo across the back of his neck that said "Natalie," his ex-wife's name.

"I was young and stupid and thought it was a good way to show affection, which it's not," the 39-year-old Tucker said.

He started to get it removed six months before he remarried in 2017 and finished up late last year, with a couple of faint blue spots left.

Tucker says he occasionally felt a poking sensation but otherwise the brief treatments didn't hurt—unlike the "super painful" process of getting the tattoo. Tucker says the area felt like it was lightly sunburned for a few days after each treatment.

Some tips from the medical groups:

—Find a dermatologist, preferably board certified, with tattoo removal expertise and advanced laser surgery training.

—Make sure the doctor has lasers that cover multiple light wavelengths, matching the colors of your tattoo. Ask if they have the newest lasers—Q-switched or picosecond lasers, Bernstein says.

—Ask to see before-and-after photos of patients with a similar skin tone.

—Follow after-care instructions. The area likely will be red and irritated, as skin is right after getting a [tattoo](#).

—Don't rush the job. It's best to wait a couple of months between sessions.

"That'll cut down on the number of sessions," produce the best result and reduce the cost, Friedman says.

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