

Tattoo after care ^[1]

Dear Alice,

How long does it take a tattoo to heal when you get one?

Answer

Dear Reader,

While there are consistencies about tattoo healing from one person to another — for example, the steps that the cells in your skin take to rebuild after the tattoo is done — one thing that is *not* consistent is the amount of time that healing takes. The short answer to your question is that healing can take anywhere from 45 days to up to six months. Factors that influence healing time include:

- The **size** of the tattoo (larger tattoos in more sensitive areas could be slower to heal)
- The **area** on the body that's getting inked (tattoos on joints like knees or elbows can also take longer)
- A person's baseline **health** (chronic conditions like diabetes or lupus could lengthen healing times)
- The **pressure** applied by the tattoo artist (the greater the pressure, the longer the healing time could be)

That said, there are things that you can do to improve healing over all. Read on for some tips to consider when caring for new ink!

After you've gone under the needle and had time to take a look at your new body art, ask your tattoo artist for their recommendation on when to remove the bandage. Some may suggest taking it off within two hours afterward so that the bandage doesn't stick to the skin. Others may suggest keeping it in place for up to 24 hours. In either case, before removing the bandage or touching a healing tattoo, wash your hands thoroughly ^[2]. To keep your new ink art clean, gently wash the tattoo area (using clean hands) with warm water and soap (it can be antibacterial if you prefer, but doesn't have to be). When you're done washing, gently patting the tattoo dry (avoid rubbing it) will prevent further irritation of the area. You can use a clean paper towel if you are worried about introducing germs that might linger on a cloth towel. You may also see some blood — this

is normal. Again, just blot it away.

Once clean and dry, apply a moisturizing ointment to help protect the skin as it's healing. You can use a basic perfume-free moisturizer, or an ointment recommended by the tattoo artist. If you're allergic to antibacterial products, or to petroleum products, you might want to check in with a dermatologist or your tattoo artist to find a product that will work for you. Once moisturized, you can leave your skin open to the air to breathe — you don't need to re-bandage it. For the next two weeks, it's recommended that you wash, pat, and moisturize three times a day. If you like, after the fifth day you can switch to a water-based body lotion instead of an ointment. Again, in order to reduce potential irritation and speed healing, look for one that's dye- and fragrance-free.

As the area heals, the skin around the tattoo will likely start to peel, a little like a sunburn. Although it may itch, try to avoid scratching or picking at the skin because it could alter the tattoo color or contribute to infection or scarring. Applying some moisturizer may help to relieve the itchiness. The top layer of skin, once scabbed and shed, will leave behind a newer, pinker, more wrinkly layer. It won't always look like that; after some time, it'll start to look more uniform with your other skin. During this healing phase, you can aid your body's ability to regenerate by limiting sun exposure and avoiding tanning beds. If you do need to be in the sun, choosing sunscreen with a SPF 30 or higher can help the healing process and also keep your tattoo color from fading. Experts suggest avoiding soaking the tattooed area for long periods in the healing phase (i.e., by avoiding swimming and opting for a shower instead of a bath). Finally, it is suggested to avoid harsh chemicals like hydrogen peroxide or rubbing alcohol as these won't help your skin heal — they may just make the area red, irritated, and inflamed.

If you notice any kind of allergic reaction or infection you may want to visit a health care provider. Warning signs include excessive soreness or tenderness, redness, drainage, swelling, or a rash at the tattoo site. If you're diligent about cleaning your tattoo though, infection won't likely be an issue. Hope this after-care information is now inked on your brain and that you enjoy your new adornment for years to come!

Alice!

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