

Tired of my tattoo: Where do I go to get it off? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

This is embarrassing for me, because I got a tattoo on my arm, and after two years of trying to convince myself that it is "me," unfortunately, it is not. Where do I start to search for tattoo removal, and is it expensive?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Beauty may be skin deep, but it helps when you're comfortable with what's inked on that skin! If you feel that your tattoo doesn't fit you anymore, you have several removal options to consider, including laser surgery, excision, and dermabrasion. Which method is right for you depends on the size, location, length of time you've had the tattoo, and other personal factors, such as how quickly you heal and how much money you're able to spend. Here are some more details about each method of tattoo removal:

- **Laser surgery:** The most expensive method of tattoo removal, laser surgery is popular because it's less likely to have side effects. The laser pulses simply pass into the outer layers of skin and break up the pigment into small pieces that can be absorbed into the body. Usually, it takes several laser treatments to completely remove a tattoo. Larger and more brightly colored tattoos usually take more treatments to remove. In addition, you may experience blistering, and it's possible that this may not fully remove your tattoo.
- **Excision:** More commonly used for smaller tattoos, the skin around the tattoo is numbed with a local anesthetic and the tattooed skin is cut away with a scalpel. The edges of skin are then sewn together, leaving a small scar. Larger tattoos may have to be excised in several stages (removing small pieces one at a time) and might require skin grafts taken from another area of the body to replace the missing skin.
- **Dermabrasion:** In this procedure, the skin on top of and around the tattoo is numbed with an anesthetic spray. Then the skin is buffed using a round sanding instrument (or a water and salt solution known as salabrasion). This removes the top layers of skin and the tattoo ink. Since the peeling of skin causes some bleeding, a bandage is placed over the "sanded" area while it heals. This method can cause skin discoloration, changes in skin texture, and scarring.

Depending on the size of the tattoo and which removal option you select, the procedure can range from several hundred to several thousand dollars. In addition, since tattoo removal is usually considered a cosmetic procedure, it's not typically covered by health insurance. For those who are concerned about covering these costs (with or without insurance), a DIY (do-it-yourself) option may seem appealing. However, it's key to note that many DIY treatments have not been found to be effective.

An effective way to start your search to be ink-free could be speaking with your health care provider to see if they might direct you to reputable and experienced dermatologists in your area. They may be able to discuss your options with you in more depth and help you make the best decision you can. While this may answer some of your questions about tattoo removal, only you can decide what may work best for you. If you find that erasing your chosen image isn't the best option, you may also consider working with an experienced tattoo artist to design a cover-up of your original tattoo to turn it into something that's more you.

Good luck!

Alice!

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Published date:

Aug 02, 2002

Last reviewed on:

Apr 13, 2018

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