

Madigan Army Medical Center

Referral Guidelines

Tattoo Removal

Diagnosis/Definition

Tattoos involve the introduction of pigment into the dermis (second) layer of skin, resulting in a permanent discoloration of that skin. Many substances are used resulting in a fairly wide variety of colors. This should not be confused with the use of henna (paraphenylenediamine) currently being used in temporary marking of the skin.

Initial Diagnosis and Management

- Acquiring tattoos is currently an increasingly popular activity. However, there are those who become dissatisfied with the tattoo and become interested in removal of the tattoo.
- There are several techniques that are currently used for tattoo removal.
 - Lasers target specific colors in the tattoo, resulting in tiny explosions of the pigment in the skin. The body then processes the tiny fragments, making them less visible or invisible. Potential side effects include blisters, scars, “ghosting” (the pigment is gone, but the skin remains lighter in color, in the pattern of the tattoo), infections and incomplete removal. There are some colors that lasers do poorly in removing. Patients should not expect that lasers will make the tattoo completely vanish. Also, we do not know the medical results of having the pigment remain in our systems. Keep in mind that many tattoo dyes are made of metal salts, including cobalt (blue) Chromium (green), etc.
 - Excision of a small tattoo may be considered. The whole tattoo will be gone, but a scar will be left in its place. Risks also include bleeding, infection, incomplete removal, pain.
 - Dermabrasion/Salabrasion: The skin and the pigment are literally sanded off of the skin. This is much less common since the advent of lasers in tattoo removal. It tends to leave a more prominent scar, is much more painful, and is quite messy.

Ongoing Management and Objectives

As a general rule, Tattoo removal is not offered at most MTFs. It is a cosmetic procedure and is not a covered benefit under Tricare. At Madigan Dermatology clinic, tattoo removal may be offered on a case by case basis but because of the cosmetic nature of the surgery, a fee is charged for the treatment. Complete resolution of the tattoo rarely occurs and some residual pigment often remains. Completely removing the tattoo is not guaranteed and no money will be refunded depending on the outcome.

Indications for Specialty Care Referral

Patient has a tattoo and there may be an immune system reaction associated with one or more of the dyes (typically, red dye is the most common).

Patient has a tattoo in Green or Black Ink and will pay for the procedure. This only occurs on a case by case basis depending on current number of providers and patients currently undergoing tattoo removal. Patients are encouraged to explore treatment options off post prior to the referral.

Criteria for Return to Primary Care

Patient will be returned to primary care after counseling has been performed. Patient will be returned to primary care after tattoo reactions have been addressed.

Revised: **April 2012**

Referral Guidelines require review every three years.

References:

[American Society for Dermatological Surgery](#)

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