

INKED UP

The Truth About How Fine-Line Tattoos Heal

Ever wanted to know how those super-dainty works of art will age down the line? Look no further.

BY EMILY REKSTIS

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Three years ago, you wouldn't have been able to scroll through Instagram without coming across friends, influencers, and celebs alike showing off their newest fine-line tattoos. These super dainty tattoos grew in popularity thanks to celebrity tattoo artists like **Dr. Woo** and **Jonboy** and their elegantly cool designs as seen on A-listers like Selena Gomez, Miley Cyrus, and Demi Lovato. But not all who took part in this trend are happy with the results a few years later.

TikTok is filled with videos of people showing off their now faded fine line tattoos. **@thesnacmac** posted a video on June 27 asking to see how different people's fine line tattoos look after years of healing. "I keep seeing all the fine line, incredibly detailed, minuscule tattoos on my for you page, and they're so pretty, don't get me wrong," she says. "But I just want to see one of those like a year out."

Many users have stitched this video, showing off their healed fine line tattoos with a mix of happy and displeased customers. "ALL tattoos bleed out over time," writes **@fleshtattoos905**. "Fine line is a trend... but it won't save you. That's a big IF the tattoo doesn't fade to a blurry mess right away." In the accompanying video, the user shows off a variety of hand tattoos such as a small heart on their finger and an unrecognizable design on their thumb that might have once been a candle.

Then there are those who have used this video to defend fine line tattoos, showing off their healed designs still in great shape. "This whole dis on the fine line tattoo culture is only because a lot of tattooers can't do fine line and if it's done properly it'll hold up just fine," Portland-based tattoo artist **Parker Midnight** said in one of the stitch videos.

So what exactly is the deal with fine line tattoos? Are they a bad idea or do they just get a bad rap? "I think that most people don't know much about tattoos beyond the fact that they saw something they liked and now they want one," tattoo artist **Martin Holbech** from Iron & Ink explains. If that's the case — then that's okay! But if you're looking for a bit of extra guidance through the process, especially when it comes to [single needle] fine line tattoos, then we're here to help.

Meet the experts:

- **Martin Holbech**, Denmark-based tattoo artist at **Iron & Ink** studio
- **JK Kim**, a New York-based fine line tattoo specialist at **Ink & Water** studio
- **Jason Schroeder**, LA and Austin-based tattoo artist that also goes by Mr. Incognito
- **Gabby Pignanelli**, a New York-based fine line tattoo specialist at **Inked NYC** studio

- **Rachel Maiman**, MD, New York City-based board-certified dermatologist at **Marmur Medical**

What are single-needle tattoos?

Also known as fine-line tattoos, this style of tattoo refers to designs that use **super skinny lines** to create delicate, sometimes intricately detailed, designs. "Fine line simply describes the tattooing technique that artists use to create tattoos with very thin lines," **JK Kim**, a fine-line tattoo specialist based in Queens, New York says. "It wasn't necessarily its own category until the past decade, when celebrity tattoo artists like **Dr. Woo** and **Jonboy** gained popularity for the style. These days the term 'fine line' is used for any tattoo that uses mostly (if not all) very thin lines, usually on the smaller side in size."

A lot of times these fine line tattoos are created with a needle that has one point instead of multiple. But that's not always the case. "Tattooers are able to mimic a single needle style with larger needles using three, four or five points 3, 4, 5 points," Kim explains. "There aren't set guidelines to how a single needle style tattoo is done, as long as the end result is that the lines are ultra-fine."

Fine line tattoos, freshly healed JK Kim

Courtesy of JK Kim

LA and Austin-based tattoo artist **Jason Schroeder**, aka Mr. Incognito, continues, "The 'single' needle term is technically incorrect 99 percent of the time," he says, crediting how difficult it is to master a single need technique as the reason many choose not to use it. "It is a very unforgiving tool that can cause a lot of damage if not used correctly." This includes bleeding, fading, or completely disappearing.

How do fine line tattoos heal?

The biggest issue people have with fine line tattoos is how they heal, so what exactly does that look like?

"Fine line tattoos, especially single needles, have the potential to heal more on the dark gray side," New York City-based single-needle tattoo artist **Gabby Pignanelli** explains. This is not the same thing as fading, which is when the ink looks inconsistent or nearly invisible in certain areas, though oftentimes the two can be confused as one another.

With that being said, Kim points out that fine line tattoos do tend to fade quicker due to the fact that the ink isn't as densely packed under the skin as with other thicker tattoos. This then makes it easier for your body's immune system to attack and break the ink down before flushing it out of your system.

Fine line tattoos several months healed

Courtesy of JK Kim

"Because the tattooing process creates tens of thousands of wounds, the tattooing procedure pushes the immune system into overdrive," board-certified dermatologist at Marmur Medical, **Rachel Maiman** MD, explains of the healing process. "In response to injury, the body rushes a team of blood cells called macrophages to the site of the tattoo to remove the ink particles that are now in the dermis." While some of these macrophages flush the ink particles out through the lymphatic system, others remain in the dermis, allowing the injected ink to remain visible.

Regardless of style, Maiman says that all **tattoos heal** in three steps. The first stage is inflammation, which lasts about 1-3 days. "At this stage, it is normal for a tattoo to be red, swollen, and tender," she explains. "It is also common for there to be some oozing of blood and/or ink." The second stage is when the top layer of skin peels, flakes or scabs and can last up to two weeks following the appointment. The final stage, which is about a month after the treatment, is much less visible but still ongoing. "The tattoo typically remains dark and somewhat dull, after which it takes on its

more permanent vibrant color," she explains. "The skin continues to remodel underneath the tattoo for three to six months, after which tattoos are generally considered to be fully healed." Typically a tattoo is considered fully healed about three months after the appointment.

"We all love the bold, bright black look of a fresh tattoo, but as the **ink settles** into the skin, it's going to look a little different," Pignanelli continues. "Fine line or otherwise."

This is the point all the artists want to make: that it's not just fine-line tattoos that heal differently. "All tattoos fade," Holbech says. "It's just a matter of how much and that depends on a variety of things." These things include someone's skin, application, and, most importantly, **aftercare**.

Are there ways to prevent fine-line tattoos from fading?

Tattoo by **Sarah Gaugler**: freshly healed

one year healed

two years healed

five years healed (Courtesy of Kara McGrath, Tattoo by **Sarah Gaugler**)

As previously stated, all tattoos heal and age differently, including fine line tattoos. However, there are a few things you can do to minimize fading or spreading.

Moisturize skin before and after the appointment to ensure your skin is at its healthiest. Post-appointment moisturization is crucial as it helps minimize the possibility of cracking, drying out, or bleeding. "A moisture sealing

product 2-3 times per day should be applied diligently until the scabs have fully healed," Maiman says. However, she notes that most tattoo artists recommend avoiding occlusive petroleum-based emollients, saying these can actually damage newly acquired ink.

There are a lot of great products on the market formulated specifically to preserve ink, including Holbech's favorite, **Sorry Mom Original Tattoo Balm**.



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Another key step to preserving your tattoo is staying out of the water or sun following your appointment. In fact, **sun exposure** is a tattoo's worst enemy. "Prolonged exposure to the sun can be super harmful to the longevity of your tattoo," Maiman explains. "UV rays from the sun will penetrate the skin and essentially break down the pigments in the tattoo. Once those pigments are damaged, the tattoo will ultimately appear much lighter and less vibrant than it once did." If you are going out in the sun once the tattoo is fully healed, be extra proactive with your **sunscreen** application. That said, sunscreen is always necessary to protect your tattoo and help it age well.

Lastly, if you want to keep a fine line tattoo in tip-top shape, you may want to avoid high-motion areas such as the fingers or feet. Those **finger tats** a la Hailey Bieber can be chic, but are more likely to fade due to friction.

So, should I get a fine-line tattoo?

If you are interested in getting a fine line tattoo, there are some things to keep in mind before diving in, but the biggest overarching objective is to manage expectations. For instance, not all tattoos will work as fine line tattoos. "Just because it looks like it's possible to do something minute on paper doesn't mean it'll work on skin," Kim says. "Trust your artist to tell you what's doable."

Which brings us to our next point: When it comes to any type of tattoo, but perhaps especially fine-line tattoos, the key to success is to find the right artist.

"I think clients sometimes assume that because fine line tattoos can be really small and simple, that they're super easy to tattoo, and that's not the case," Pignanelli stresses. "The smaller the needle, the more careful and precise you have to be. There's little to no room for error because you'll see it immediately. "Someone who is trained in single-needle tattoos can reduce the risk of scratchy lines, blowouts, or lines that completely disappear.

When it comes to finding these artists, social media is a good place to start. You can see the type of work they do and possible comments or tags from clients. Then once you nail down a few candidates, all the pros recommend asking to see photos of their work after they've healed. "Ask to see healed photos of tattoos, not just the fresh Instagram shots with nine different filters of contrast and sharpening," Schroeder emphasizes.

Just because fine-line tattoos — and, well, all tattoos in general — change and age over time, don't let it discourage you from getting the design you really want. "I have seen gorgeous fine line work that is over 30 years old," Schroeder says. "It is soft and gray but still has great definition and readability."

Those gorgeous, sharp designs you see on Pinterest, Instagram, and TikTok are fresh fine line designs that will look different one day — but different doesn't always mean bad. "Your tattoo will get a bit lighter or slightly thicker depending on how your body heals it," Kim says. "Go with your artist's suggestion regarding placement, size, and detail. They're the expert and are there to make your tattoo experience as fun, informative, and seamless as possible.

Read more stories about tattoos:

- [How to Choose a Tattoo Font That Will Stand the Test of Time](#)
- [Melanin Should Not Be an Obstacle for Tattoo Artists](#)
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