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SKIN TATTOOS & PIERCINGS

Tattoo Placement 101: The Ultimate Guide, From Pain Level to Healing Time

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GILBERT CARRASQUILLO / GETTY IMAGES

/ IN THIS ARTICLE

- [01 Face and Ears](#)
- [02 Shoulders and Arms](#)
- [03 Neck and Sternum](#)
- [05 Back and Buttocks](#)
- [06 Thighs and Legs](#)
- [07 Hands and Feet](#)

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Unless you're a decisive person who knows exactly what you want, you might feel a lot of uncertainty after you choose to get a tattoo. Besides the process of choosing just the right design or words, one of the most vital parts of getting inked is deciding where this art will live on your body... *forever*. Tattoos are *basically* permanent—laser removal is possible for any sloppy art or regretted matching designs with a former partner, but it costs a lot of money and time.

Tattoo placement is extremely important, as it influences a lot of factors that go into the artists' access, clients' pain tolerance, and ink upkeep, including with color fading and aftercare. In addition to the popular arm, leg, and thigh placements, there are numerous other locations where you can choose to place your new ink. Some people even get tatted from head to toe, whether for cultural tradition, to cover other tattoos, or aesthetic preference. But whether your ambitions are big or small, it's important to remember that certain areas of the body can lead to quicker fading or may be at greater risk for infection, all thanks to movement and the body's natural functions.

For the most part, after getting a new tattoo, the aftercare process is very straightforward. "You should treat newly tattooed skin as an open wound and thus avoid any harsh chemicals, even if these may not typically irritate your skin," says board-certified dermatology PA Jennifer Schloth. "Some people recommend avoiding petroleum-based moisturizers like Vaseline and Aquaphor, as they can clog your pores and cause an acneiform reaction of the skin."

MEET THE EXPERT

- Angie Tufariello is a Brooklyn-based tattoo artist who works out of a private Bushwick/Ridgewood studio with two other artists.
- Jennifer Schloth, PA, is a board-certified dermatologist PA at Marmur Medical in New York City.
- Charles Puza, MD, is a dermatologist specializing in hair, skin, and nails. He often shares tips and insights via TikTok.

Remember, when choosing a tattoo placement, consider the size of the piece, the chosen design, visibility, and pain tolerance. Also, if you cry at the thought of needles, you can always stick to painless temporary tattoos like the ones from Inkbox, which can last up to a few weeks.

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Charles Puza. **Keep reading to learn all about tattoo placements and discover which fits your vision best.**

Face and Ears

A close up of the singer Kehlani's face and tattoos

DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS / GETTY IMAGES

Face tattoos scare me for the sole reason that I don't like the idea of needles coming anywhere near my shoulders and up. However, the popularity of small, symbolic ink on ears, the side of the face, and even front and center has piqued my interest.

Face tattoos can vary from actual designs to more natural cosmetic tattoos that create faux freckles, permanent lip color, and other subtle beauty work. This type of tattooing should be taken very seriously, as the list of things that could go wrong is very long. "In dermatology, there are 'dirty sites,'" Puza notes. "These are places on our bodies that naturally harbor more bacteria—armpits, groin, mouth, mucous membranes. These spots are more prone to infection." Ear tattoos can be painful when inked directly on the skin near the face; however, on the ear itself, tattoo artists have claimed their clients don't feel much pain for the usually quick and minimal tattoos. The closer you get to the parts of your skin that are naturally sensitive, the higher the chances of experiencing some discomfort.


Shoulders and Arms

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@MIRYAMLUMPINI

An ideal location for a first-time tattoo, work on arms is usually the easiest because of accessibility, according to Tufariello. While the pain level is on the lower end, areas of the arms tend to fade more due to creasing and the density of the skin. "Areas of the body that have thicker skin, or areas where you move a lot, tend to fade. For example, the elbow area can heal poorly due to constant moving and stretching of the skin and can result in blurred tattoo lines," Schloth says. She continues that as with other parts of the body, "areas that regularly come in contact with surfaces in the environment can be more prone to infection."

Neck and Sternum

A rose tattoo on a person's sternum

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between a person's breasts, curating a permanent piece that usually means a great deal to the wearer.

Tufariello has worked on all parts of the body, with many of her designs covering large areas. "I'm always honored when someone trusts me for a tattoo, but I am always extra elated to work on a sternum or stomach," she says. "It's the center of their body... their center of self and life."

While this is a central place of the body—it's the location of the heart, ribs, and lungs—Tufariello, like most tattoo artists, remarks that this is usually the most painful place to get inked. Precision is important for an artist, but the sensitivity of tattooing over bone can sometimes be too much for clients to handle.

With any type of inking, Puza urges conducting a patch test to determine how skin will react to the ink and intrusion. "A needle is used to punch through the top layer of your skin (epidermis) and insert a foreign material (the tattoo ink) into the dermis," he says. "Everyone reacts differently to foreign bodies, the body's response may change over time, and the ink/material/dye can vary from parlor to parlor."

Stomach and Lower Abdomen



A woman in a tube top and fuzzy cardigan with a crying Venus tattoo on her stomach


@GIRLKNEWYORK

Loving your body can be complicated in a world with unrealistic beauty standards, but tattooing adds a type of coverage that doesn't hide your features—rather, enhancing them with an artistic touch. The stomach and lower abdomen are versatile locations, allowing you to alternate between keeping your special piece to yourself and proudly showing it off.

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be tricky when it comes to pain and infections, as the closer you get to the genital area, the more prone your new ink is to bacterial infections. While Aquaphor might not work every time, Puza notes that "the use of petroleum jelly immediately after tattooing can help to prevent outside factors, such as unwanted pigment and infections, from entering the skin."

Back and Buttocks

 Zoe Kravitz's back tattoos

GILBERT CARRASQUILLO / GETTY IMAGES

Sometimes I lay awake at night thinking about Ben Affleck’s huge phoenix tattoo and the utter chaos surrounding it. One thing is for sure—we can safely say that he must have patience since a back tattoo that big probably took hours to complete. If you have a vision that needs a lot of space or are seeking an option that allows you to go between showing off your tattoo and hiding it, the back is a standout location.

While the upper and bottom parts of the back are mainly muscle and don’t hurt as much, areas that are close to a bone or spine will be more sensitive to pain. When it’s time to moisturize, you may want to ask a partner for help reaching every inch of skin, especially if the ink is fresh. "The only time special attention should be used as to the type of skincare creams and cleansers is when the tattoo is new, as discussed previously," Schloth reminds us. But that doesn’t mean you should completely disregard your skincare for your tattoo after it has healed: "The skin should continue to be moisturized even once the tattoo has finished healing, as this allows the tattoo to appear more vibrant and fresh, even with aging," she adds.

Thighs and Legs

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The bottom half of the body has many areas where a tattoo can be displayed—and covered if needed. The upper thigh is common for large pieces and is a popular spot since the pain level is inherently low for many. However, going down the leg, things can get a little tricky.

As with your arms, areas on the body where bones are prominent will be more painful, as tattooing over these spots tends to hurt. Schloth reminds us that "the farther you get from the heart, the longer it takes for that area to heal, so you have to be more diligent with aftercare in these areas." She also says that areas you might regularly shave—like the legs—are more prone to infection because "shaving naturally causes trauma to the skin, which could promote bacterial infections."

Getting a tattoo can be a very personal and intimate experience, especially when inking a place where you're looking for a confidence boost. "I always recommend checking in with one's body, asking themselves which part needs some love," Tufariello says. "I love that a tattoo can change how we once saw a body part that we disliked. For me, I hated my legs until I started getting tattoos on them."

Hands and Feet

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BRYAN BEDDER / GETTY IMAGES

The hands and feet can be great places to get tiny tattoos or anything special you'd like to show off, though it's important to note that upkeep is more difficult in these areas. The more use a body part gets from everyday activities, the more likely a tattoo will fade if placed there. This is extra true of tattoos on your hands or feet. "Palms and the bottom of feet tend to fade quickly," Tufariello says. "For feet, walking usually makes us lose skin quicker than other spots. And with palms, we lose skin due to washing our hands and just the general wear and tear of using them so often." When it comes to pain in these areas, Tufariello remembers the one time she tattooed the bottom of a man's foot, and "he was certainly yelling through the centuries."

In line with the popularity of ear tattoos, there's heightened interest in finger tattoos, and it's easy to understand why—the idea of getting a permanent wedding band or words cleverly placed across your knuckles seems hardcore and delicate all at once. If you choose to get one, though, bear in mind: These placements are likely to need frequent touch-ups, potentially as often as every month.

To add to the other warnings, the sun is not on our side in this instance either. "Areas that are open and exposed to the sun, like fingers and hands, are more likely to fade faster over time if you are not using proper SPF," Schloth says. "You should be slathering all parts of your body in sunscreen, but for specific tattoo care, reach for the Green Goo Solar Goo SPF 30 Salve (\$11)."

UP NEXT: A Comprehensive Guide to Every Type of Tattoo