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,

Diamonds and love may be forever but, thanks to advances in dermatology, tattoos are not! Several methods of removing tattoos include:

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.

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. Buffing using a round sanding instrument (or a water and salt solution known as Salabrasion) 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/or scarring.
Which method is right for you will depend on the size, location, and length of time you've had the tattoo (new ink and pastel hues are often harder to remove than old, faded tats), and other personal factors, such as how quickly you heal and how much money you are willing/able to spend. Unfortunately, tattoo removal is expensive. Depending on the size of the tattoo and which removal option you select, tattoo removal can range from several hundred to several thousand dollars. In addition, since tattoo removal is usually considered a "cosmetic" procedure, it is not typically covered by health insurance.

Start your search to be ink-free by speaking with your health care provider to see if s/he can direct you to reputable and experienced dermatologists in your area. Finally, while this may answer some of your questions about tattoo removal, only you can decide what will work best for you. If you find that erasing your chosen image is not the best option, you may also consider re-inking your tattoo into something that's more you.

Alice!
Category:
General Health [2]
Body Decoration [3]

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