

# Adolescent "SHORTS"

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## Adolescent Update

## Tattoos - The Hidden Dangers

By Roberta Renicker RN, BSN, MSA

This issue deals with a very popular topic. Tattoos are showing up on more and more people, young and not-so-young. Health care providers have an obligation to set an example and discuss "hot topics" with teens whenever possible.

Roberta Renicker, RN, BSN, MSA, is our guest author once again. She enlightened us about piercings in the Jan/Feb 2003 issue of *Adolescent Shorts*. She is the consultant in Community Health for the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. She is the hepatitis C educator for the state and is available to speak to providers and/or consumers about hepatitis C. She can be reached at 573-751-6113.

Please continue to share how *Adolescent Shorts* is being used in your setting. We love to have requests for reprints or permission to copy the information to give to others. Remember the newsletter is also available on the Internet at [www.childrensmarcy.org](http://www.childrensmarcy.org). Then search for "adolescent medicine" and click on "newsletter".

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What do Eminem, Mike Tyson, and P. Diddy all have in common? For one thing, some teens look up to them. For another, they all have tattoos, and sooner or later an adolescent you know will want to be "N'Sync" with the latest "body art."

It can be called self-expression, right of passage, or even disfigurement, but the real issue is larger than style or independence. There is a real health danger that health providers, parents, caretakers and teens need to know more about in order to make responsible choices.

People with tattoos are nine times more likely to be infected with hepatitis C according to a recent study by Robert Haley, MD, Chief of Epidemiology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Hepatitis C can develop into a chronic disease that attacks the liver, leading to liver failure and liver cancer at an early age. It is spread by infected blood and infected needles, which is the virus' connection with tattooing. Tattoos involve many needles and the making of many tiny punctures in the skin. Each puncture carries the potential for contamination - not just from hepatitis, but also HIV and other communicable diseases.

Hepatitis C is considered the "silent killer" as frequently there are no symptoms. People can have the virus for 10 or more years and not be aware they have it until they have reached end-stage liver failure. Treatment is available, but it is costly. The best prevention is not putting oneself at risk for exposure to the virus.

There is a major epidemic of hepatitis C in this country. Parents and teens need to be educated that a tattoo is not just a "neat picture" on their skin. Tattoos can result in life-long infections.

Young people can see the rock stars with tattoos, yet they go into a tattoo parlor and they do not "see viruses" or the potential health risks. Adolescents are also buying tattoo kits (advertised on the back of tattoo magazines). They are having "tattoo parties" and giving each other tattoos. Some may get tattoos at flea markets or fly-by-night shops that want to make easy money. It is doubtful they are concerned about hepatitis C.

Many people are trying their best to provide safe tattooing, but this industry has a lot of nonconformists. There are some tattoo shops and reputable artists that try to use good health practices. They believe it is important to enforce infection control procedures in their shops. There are, however, many who do not care. Health departments officials find it difficult to catch up with the "flea market" artist ready to make a fast buck and drive to the next town.

Regardless of risk, regulation and cost, if an adolescent wants a tattoo he/she will probably get one. Health care providers and parents can help our kids make responsible decisions. We can help them become informed consumers. We need to keep them informed of the risks. Parents and caretakers can be encouraged to talk with their teens about the risk of infections from tattoos and other risk issues.

Although in some states, it is loosely regulated; Missouri does have statutes that address this issue specifically. The statute is printed on page 2 of this newsletter.

Health providers can advocate for teens to become informed consumers. Here are a few points for teens to keep in mind before they allow a tattoo to be placed on them. Remind them that this may have a major health impact later in their lives.

- Ask if the artist uses an autoclave to sterilize equipment.
- Make sure the artist wears disposable gloves.
- Ask what training the artist has taken. Is there a certificate available?
- Find out if your state has requirements for cleanliness inspections.
- Make sure that your Hepatitis B vaccine is complete.
- Individual containers of ink, ointment and water should be used for one client and then discarded.
- New sterile needles must always be removed from a sterile wrapper and opened **IN FRONT OF THE TEEN**. If this is not happening, empower them to **LEAVE**.
- Are used needles discarded into a special container?
- Ask yourself - "Is my life worth the risk of a homemade job?" Don't settle for second rate. You're worth it!

*Missouri Revised Statutes Chapter 324, Section 324.520 - 524 deals with tattooing, branding, and body piercing.*

*It states in part that:*

"No person shall knowingly tattoo, brand or perform body piercing on a minor unless such a person obtains the prior written informed consent of the minor's parent or legal guardian. The minor's parent or legal guardian shall execute the written informed consent required pursuant to this subsection in the presence of the person performing the tattooing, branding or body piercing on the minor, or in the presence of an employee or agent of such person. Any person who fraudulently misrepresents himself or herself as a parent is guilty of a class B misdemeanor.

A person shall not tattoo, brand or perform body piercing on another person if the other person is under the influence of intoxicating liquor or a controlled substance.

A person who violates this section is guilty of a misdemeanor and shall be fined not more than five hundred dollars. If there is a subsequent violation of this section within one year of the initial violation, such person shall be fined not less than five hundred dollars or more than one thousand dollars.

No person under the age of eighteen shall tattoo, brand or perform body piercing on another person."

The director of the division of professional registration shall promulgate rules and regulations relative to the hygienic practice of the tattoo establishment. Certain standards of hygiene are to be met and maintained by tattoo establishments and practitioners in order to receive and maintain a license for the practice of tattooing.

(L. 1998 H.B.1601. et al. s.24, & 25A.L.1999 H.B. 343)

Adolescent "SHORTS" is a bimonthly newsletter supported by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services around adolescent issues for Missouri providers. Any comments or suggestions are welcome and should be directed to either Daryl Lynch, MD or Patti Van Tuinen.



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Articles in *Adolescent "SHORTS"* refer to boys and girls. For simplicity, the pronouns "he" and "she" are used interchangeably unless otherwise noted.