

Tattoo Removal: How to, Costs, Before and After Pictures, and More

Considering getting some ink removed? There are several ways to approach tattoo removal:

- laser removal
- surgical excision
- dermabrasion

Tattoo removal generally works, but some tattoos are much harder to remove than others. Older tattoos as well as stick-and-poke tattoos are easier to remove than newer ones, for example.

Some colors are easier to remove than others as well. These include:

- black
- brown
- dark blue
- green

Larger, more colorful tattoos are typically more time-consuming and expensive to remove than smaller, lighter, and less colorful ones.

Due to the risk of side effects, it may also be more difficult to remove tattoos if you have:

- darker skin
- a preexisting skin condition, like eczema
- a health condition that affects the skin, such as herpes

However, this doesn't mean you can't remove your tattoo if any of this applies to you. It just means you may need to take a bit more time to find the best removal option for you.

When thinking about tattoo removal options, you'll want to consider several factors, including:

- cost
- scarring risk
- effectiveness
- time commitment

Again, these factors will depend largely on the size, complexity, and condition of your tattoo, as well as your skin.

Here's a quick look at how different types of tattoo removal compare to each other, followed by a more in-depth look at each.

Laser removal

Most experts consider laser removal to be the most successful and cost-effective way to remove tattoos. Often, lasers don't completely remove a tattoo. Instead, they significantly lighten or fade it so it's much less noticeable.

Today, most tattoos are removed with a Q-switched laser, which sends out energy in one strong pulse. This pulse of energy heats up the ink in your skin to dissolve it. You'll need to receive a number of laser treatments over several weeks or longer to remove your tattoo. Older or less complex tattoos will require fewer sessions, while newer or more complex tattoos will require more.

If you have darker skin, you may want to consider Q-switched Nd:YAG laser treatment, which is less likely to change the color of dark skin than traditional Q-switched lasers.

In general, it takes about 7 to 10 sessions to remove a tattoo with laser treatment. You'll have to wait 6 to 8 weeks between sessions for best results.

Following each session, you'll want to follow any aftercare instructions you're given. Usually, this will involve applying antibacterial ointment to your skin for several days. The ointment will help heal your skin and reduce the risk of infection. Change the wound dressing each time you apply the ointment.

For at least the next 2 weeks:

- Keep the treated area clean and dry.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing.
- Avoid exposing the treated area to direct sunlight.
- Don't pick at any scabs or blisters that form.

Laser tattoo removal typically carries a lower risk of scarring than other removal options, just be sure not to pick at the area as it heals, as this can increase your risk of scarring.

Surgical removal

Surgical removal, also called excision tattoo removal, involves cutting off tattooed skin and stitching remaining skin back together. It's the most invasive method of tattoo removal, but also the only guaranteed way to completely remove a tattoo.

It's often less expensive than laser removal, but it will always leave a scar. As a result, it's usually only done on smaller tattoos.

Surgical excision is usually done in a plastic surgery office. You'll be given a local anesthetic before the surgeon uses a sharp, knife-like instrument called a scalpel to cut away the tattooed skin. Then, they'll stitch the remaining skin back together. The procedure itself can take a couple hours, depending on the size of the tattoo.

The healing process will last for several weeks. During this time, you'll want to apply the prescribed or recommended ointment for several days to help heal your skin and avoid risk of infection. Keep the site clean and out of the sun for at least 2 weeks, and follow your surgeon's aftercare instructions.

Dermabrasion

Dermabrasion involves using a sanding device to remove layers of skin to allow ink to leach out. Its effectiveness varies widely from person to person, making it a less popular option.

You'll want to skip dermabrasion if you have very sensitive skin or a skin condition like eczema. If you take blood thinners, you may also have a higher risk of experiencing bleeding, bruising, and changes in your skin color following the procedure. People with darker skin may also have a greater risk of skin pigment changes.

During a typical dermabrasion session, a clinician will administer a local anesthetic to reduce any pain. They'll use a high speed rotating abrasive device that sands off the top layers of the skin to let tattoo ink escape.

Usually, this is done during one procedure at a cosmetic surgeon's office. The length of time the procedure takes depends on the size and color of your tattoo. Larger tattoos with many colors may take more than an hour to treat.

The treated area will likely feel painful and raw for several days after the procedure

Full recovery can take 2 to 3 weeks. The pinkness or discoloration of the treated area usually fades in 8 to 12 weeks.

As you recover, your clinician may advise you to:

- Apply an ointment to prevent infection.
- Avoid direct sunlight for 3 to 6 months after the procedure.
- Apply sunscreen to the site every time you're outside.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing on the site until it heals.
- Avoid soaking the site in water as it heals.

Some people experience scarring from dermabrasion treatments. You can reduce scarring by:

- using the prescribed ointments
- wearing sunscreen
- avoiding the sun
- using anti-scarring oils and creams, after the treatment site has fully healed

After treatment, dermabrasion may cause:

- changes in skin color, such as lightening, darkening, or blotchiness
- infection
- redness or discoloration, swelling, and bleeding
- scarring

To prevent these complications, be sure to follow your clinician's aftercare instructions. Make sure the clinician has proper licensing and good reviews, too (more on this later)

Tattoo removal creams and chemical peels are the most widely available and least expensive option. There's a reason why: There's no solid evidence that they work.

At best, they might slightly lighten a tattoo, according to anecdotal reports. At worst, they can result in a serious chemical burn.

Due to the high risk of skin irritation and allergic reaction, experts don't recommend using DIY tattoo removal creams to get rid of your tattoo.

If you aren't trying to go tattoo-free, it might also be worth considering getting a cover-up tattoo.

A cover-up can be a cost-effective, quick option for disguising the tattoo you already have. This method is a good option if you don't like the design of your tattoo but wouldn't mind another tattoo.

When you ask a tattoo artist to do a cover-up, they'll work with you to design a tattoo that can be used to hide what you already have.

This may involve creating a design with heavier lines, more shading, or unique shapes. Many tattoo artists are quite skilled at creating new designs to hide unwanted tattoos.

After you agree on a design, your tattoo artist will apply the cover-up just as they did your original tattoo.

Regardless of the tattoo removal method you choose, finding a qualified specialist is key for both safety and effectiveness.

It's best to start by talking with a licensed dermatologist, ideally one who specializes in cosmetic procedures. They can guide you toward the best option for your circumstances. If needed, they can also refer you to a surgeon or other medical professional who can do the procedure.

If you're in the United States, you can search for dermatologists in your area using the American Academy of Dermatology's finder tool.

Tattoos are a common yet permanent body decoration. For people who no longer want a tattoo, there are different ways to remove it.

Tattoo removal methods vary in cost, efficacy, and recovery time. Knowing your options can help you make a decision about tattoo removal that's right for you and your budget.