



Newest tattoo trend? Removal

ALBANY, New York (AP) --At 23, Alexandra Baker figures it's time to get rid of the spider on her ankle.

The tattoo was inked on in college -- one of seven on her body. But Baker's outlook has changed somewhat. The spider is something to hide rather than exhibit. So it's coming off, along with two little fairies on her chest.

"I can't stand having them anymore," said Baker, who lives in New York's Hudson Valley. "It's just not how I want to portray myself anymore."

Baker is not alone. Doctors say tattoo removals are becoming more common at a time when people frequently sport butterflies on their ankles or barbed wire around their biceps.

"There are a number of people who did this and have said 'Geez, this is not what I want.' What seems really great at age 17 or 20 may not seem so great at age 30," said Dr. Brian Kinney, a Los Angeles plastic surgeon and spokesman for the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

Tattoos, once commonly associated with bikers and veterans, proliferated in the '90s on skin of all types of people -- from students to bartenders to bankers. In a nationwide poll this year by the Scripps Survey Research Center, 15 percent of respondents said they had a tattoo. The percentage almost doubled among 18 to 34-year-olds.

Some regret it.

No hard numbers exist for tattoo removals, but medical professionals report more people coming in for laser treatments in recent years. Dr. Elizabeth McBurney, a New Orleans-area dermatologist, said she used to do five laser treatments a month in the 1980s. She did twice that one day recently.

All sorts of people come in for removals, doctors say. Some had such slogans as "Tammy Forever" committed to ink, only to find love was fleeting. Others, like Baker, got tattooed in their youth and later regretted being imprinted with a flaming death head or a Flying V guitar.

There are a few common tattoo removal methods -- people try to rub them out with chemical lotions or have a doctor abrade or surgically cut them out. State-of-the-art removals are done with lasers that penetrate through the outer layer of skin and fragment the tattoo pigment.

Lasers require several treatments over a period of weeks, can cost hundreds of dollars and can be painful.

Also, a faint trace of the tattoo remains.

Researchers at Wright State's School of Medicine in Ohio are studying the effectiveness of a cream used for genital warts as a complement to laser treatment. The results aren't known yet, though researchers say they have been inundated with offers from would-be guinea pigs.

Professionals -- from artists who create tattoos to doctors who remove them -- say the best strategy is not to get ill-

considered tattoos in the first place. Their advice: Think. Will you enjoy having your fraternity letters on your backside in a decade?

T-Bone, an artist at Lark Tattoo in Albany, said people must sign a consent form before getting a tattoo. Still, the occasional customer has a change of heart after the fact. He echoes the advice of doctors: Don't get a tattoo of your sweetheart's name.

"Unless it's 'Mom,'" Kinney said, "because your mom won't go away."

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