

Laser Tattoo Removal

Information and advice for patients

Birmingham Regional Skin Laser Centre

What is laser tattoo removal?

Laser tattoo removal is a treatment to help fade and remove unwanted tattoos. We are able to remove the following types of tattoos:

- **Amateur tattoos** - normally formed using single colour Indian ink and sits close to the top layer of skin.
- **Professional tattoos** - usually multi-coloured tattoos formed using a machine and maple ink.
- **Cosmetic tattoos** - eyebrows, eyeliner and lip liner which are permanently tattooed onto the skin.
- **Traumatic tattoos** - tattoos that have been caused by some form of trauma such as from a lead pencil wound or after an accident where the skin has made contact with gravel.

For a good result most people need between 4 and 12 treatment sessions, approximately 12 weeks apart. If your treatment has been funded by the NHS, the number of treatments you will be offered will be determined by the budget holder.

What are the benefits of laser tattoo removal?

Laser tattoo removal is the most effective way of removing unwanted tattoos.

If you are allergic to the ink used for your tattoo having laser tattoo removal will remove the ink and therefore reduce your allergy symptoms.

How does the treatment work?

The energy from the laser causes the tattoo particles to heat up and break down into tiny fragments. Then over a period of 8-12 weeks the body's scavenger cells 'mop up' these fragments causing the tattoo to gradually fade over time.

Amateur tattoos generally respond more quickly to treatment than professional tattoos. Professional tattoos are more difficult to remove completely as the ink tends to be deeper in the skin. Black, blue and red colours aren't too difficult to remove, however brighter colours such as green, yellow and purple do not absorb the energy as well and take longer to break down, meaning they may need more treatments.

What are the risks of laser tattoo removal?

Changes in skin pigment (colour)

- Darkening of the skin (hyper-pigmentation) in the area that has been treated is the most common risk of laser tattoo removal and is more likely to occur in people who tan easily or who have darker skin. Hyper-pigmentation will usually resolve itself in the next 3 – 6 months.

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- Whitening of the skin (hypo-pigmentation) can also occur and in most cases this will resolve by itself over a few weeks, but in some rare cases it can be permanent.
- If your tattoo contains iron pigment (usually in cosmetic tattoos) then rarely the treated area can darken immediately after treatment and turn black. A test treatment will be carried out on your tattoo first so that we can try to predict if this would happen.

Scarring

3 in 100 patients develop a scar in the area that has been treated. To reduce this risk it is important that you do not pick, scratch or aggravate the area as removing a scab or blister can increase your risk of developing a scar.

Not achieving the desired result

Unfortunately we are not able to guarantee 100% clearance of the tattoo. In some cases brighter colours such as green, yellow and purple may not respond at all.

What are the risks of not having the treatment?

If you are allergic to the ink that was used for your tattoo and do not have the treatment you will still experience allergic symptoms. If you are not allergic to the ink there is no risk if you choose not to have the treatment.

Are there any alternatives to this treatment?

An alternative treatment is surgery to remove the tattoo but not all tattoos are suitable for surgery and it carries a significant risk of scarring. Large tattoos may also need a skin graft to the area (where skin is taken from another part of your body).

You may be able to conceal or camouflage the tattoo using special covering creams or make up. The British Association of Skin Camouflage can give you more information about this (see contact details at the back of this leaflet).

What will laser tattoo removal feel like?

Most people feel some pain during the treatment, which they describe as being like 'a warm elastic band hitting your skin'. If you are concerned about this you can take paracetamol before your appointment. You can also talk to the consultant about using an anaesthetic cream (Emla or Ametop) to numb the area and they can give you a prescription for this.

Preparing for laser tattoo removal

- At your first tattoo removal consultation a test treatment will be carried out on your skin to check how it reacts.

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- Laser tattoo removal cannot be performed if you have a suntan or fake tan and may have to be postponed if you do, so do not use fake tan or get a suntan before the treatment.
- If there is hair in the area that is going to be treated please shave it before you come to the hospital.
- Please purchase Aloe Vera gel (98% or more), Vaseline and sun block (SPF 30 at least) as you will need to use these after your treatment to help your skin heal.
- You can take two 500mg Paracetamol tablets approximately 1 hour before the treatment to relieve discomfort.
- If you have arranged with your consultant that you will use anaesthetic cream you will need to come to the hospital 1 hour before your appointment to have this applied and allow it time to work.
- With your consent, the doctor/nurse will take photographs of the area being treated. This is so we can compare your tattoo at the start and end of treatment to see how well the treatment has worked.

During the treatment

The treatment will be carried out by a consultant or specialist nurse and takes about 10 – 30 minutes, depending on the size of your tattoo (large tattoos may need to be treated during 2 separate appointments). Your appointment will last for approximately 30 minutes. This is what happens:

1. If you have had local anaesthetic cream applied this will be removed from the surface of your skin.
2. You will be asked to wear a pair of goggles to protect your eyes from the laser.
3. The consultant/nurse will set the laser to the relevant settings.
4. The laser will be directed to the area being treated using a hand-held device and applied to the skin.
5. When it is safe to do so the consultant/nurse will ask you to take your goggles off.
6. Aloe vera gel is then applied to the treated area to cool and soothe it and a dressing will be applied.

After the treatment

Immediately after your treatment the treated area will be red, slightly elevated and the skin will have a frosted appearance which is due to the release of tiny steam bubbles in your skin; this will disappear quickly. There may also be some minor bleeding from the area, but this will heal by itself and should not cause any problems.

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Going home

You will be able to go home straight after the treatment. If the treatment has been performed on a limb i.e. leg/arm/foot/hand, this may feel quite heavy after treatment so you should not drive yourself home. When you are at home it is important to follow the advice below.

Caring for the treated area

- You can remove the dressing 12 hours after the treatment and do not need to replace it. The area treated may look red or inflamed for the next 24-48hours.
- Apply Aloe Vera Gel regularly to the tattoo with clean hands. This will encourage healing, help the scab to form and relieve any irritation
- When blistering or scabbing appears in the next couple of days, apply Vaseline to the area regularly to keep the skin moist. This will also encourage the scab to fall off after 7-14 days.
- If the area is swollen keep it elevated to reduce swelling.
- DO NOT pick, scratch or aggravate the area as this could lead to infection or cause a scar.
- Avoid exfoliating and using any soaps or perfumed products on the treated area for 48 hours after treatment.
- Avoid any strenuous physical activities for a couple of days after treatment and avoid swimming and using a sauna until the scab has dropped off, as this may slow down the healing process.
- Avoid exposure to the sun and ultraviolet light by covering the area with clothing and applying sun block with an SPF of 30 or above every day in between treatment sessions and for 6 months after your last treatment.

Your next appointment

Your next appointment will either be booked before you leave the centre or you will be sent an appointment through the post. About 12 weeks after your final treatment you will need to come back for a follow-up appointment so that we can see how the treatment has worked and photograph the treated area.

Symptoms to report

Check your skin regularly for any problems with healing or skin pigmentation changes and contact us if you are concerned.

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Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about this treatment please contact:

Birmingham Regional Skin Laser Centre

0121 507 6637/6639/6636

Monday – Friday, 8.30am – 4pm (except bank holidays)

Further information

For more information about skin camouflage:

The British Association of Skin Camouflage

www.skin-camouflage.net

Tel: 01254 703107

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our website:

Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust

www.swbh.nhs.uk

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

- S.W. Lanigan, 'Lasers in Dermatology', 2000
- K. Nouri, 'Lasers in Dermatology and Medicine', November 2011
- Cynosure, 'Affinity QS operator manual', 2006

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5495 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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