Tattoos and piercings: Play it smart with body art

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

In the far-off past, tattoos were something only sailors had, and the only body part people pierced was their ears. Nowadays, piercings and tattoos are everywhere. But like anything you do in life — from driving a car to playing a sport — tattoos and piercings come with some risks. Taking a few precautions will help you get the best results from your new body art and avoid side effects, which can include allergic reactions to inks or piercing jewelry, infections caused by unsterile equipment and needles, and scarring.

“Body art is a popular form of self-expression, but people who decide to get a tattoo or body piercing should go to a licensed facility and take time to discuss the safety procedures with the artists working at the shop or tattoo parlor,” says Scott Bryan, a spokesman for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Fortunately, tattoos and piercings are safer than ever, but before you become a proud owner, it’s important to do your homework. Body artists are expected to adhere to strict safety procedures with the artists working at the shop or tattoo parlor, says Mike Martin, vice president and health and education coordinator for the Alliance of Professional Tattooists. “With all your power, avoid going to someone else looking out for your safety — you have to do that yourself,” says James Weber, president of the Association of Professional Piercers.

Legitimate facilities make sure that they are clean and that the person doing the piercing uses proper hand-washing techniques as well as fresh, disposable gloves and sterilized instruments — and that the jewelry and diseases spread through blood. Reputable piercers adhere to strict safety procedures to protect their customers and themselves, but as with tattoos, there are no standardized U.S. piercing regulations.

“Ask whether they have had training in bloodborne pathogen and safe tattooing techniques,” Martin advises. “And ask if they use disposable products such as disposable tubes and needles and if they have a working sterilizer on the premises to clean their equipment.”

Once you’ve received your “ink,” follow all of the aftercare instructions provided by the artist. Always make sure you wash your hands before and after you touch your new tattoo until it is completely healed.

Piercing patter

From ears to noses to navels, piercings are a popular option for self-expression. But because piercings break the skin’s protective barrier, there are some health risks, including allergic reactions to the jewelry and diseases spread through blood. Reputable piercers adhere to strict safety procedures to protect their customers and themselves, but as with tattoos, there are no standardized U.S. piercing regulations.

“You can’t be confident that there is someone else looking out for your safety — you have to do that yourself,” says James Weber, president of the Association of Professional Piercers.

Take time to discuss safety procedures with the piercer. Ask about their process and clarify that the facility is clean and that the person doing the piercing uses proper hand-washing techniques as well as fresh, disposable gloves and sterilized instruments — and that the needle being used is new. Be aware that certain piercings take longer to heal than others, and have a longer window in which they can get infected, so follow your aftercare regimen to the letter until the piercing is completely healed.

“Very often people reach for cleaning solutions that are not appropriate for piercings, such as hydrogen peroxide and rubbing alcohol,” Weber says, noting that those chemicals are harsh and can damage tissue.

A final word of advice: Never get a piercing if you’ve been drinking, or when you’re on vacation and can’t take care of it afterward or aren’t sure if the equipment and water source is sanitary.

American Public Health Association