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# Web Exclusive: Tattoo Safety

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While tattoos are commonly given to help radiologists pinpoint exactly where therapy should be given, the markings are usually about the size of a pinpoint and can be easily removed by a dermatologist or plastic surgeon. While some patients are hesitant to receive these tattoos, others actively seek out tattoo artists after their bout with cancer.

An increasing number of survivors have chosen to be adorned with tattoos, either to express their “post-traumatic growth” or to cover scars. Sasha Merritt, owner of Dragonfly Ink Custom Tattoo in San Francisco, says about 5 percent of her business is from cancer survivors and growing, including about a third of all e-mail correspondence she receives from around the country.

Clients have a variety of reasons for choosing tattoos, Merritt says. “I noticed that with a lot of people, especially older women, I get a sense of them not only wanting to cover their scar, but reclaiming their body,” she says. “It can be celebratory as well.”

One customer who had undergone a mastectomy without reconstruction came to Merritt—not to cover her scar, but to incorporate it into the tattoo design. Merritt inked a stylized lizard spanned from her chest to her shoulder, integrating her scar as the lizard’s spine. She suggests flowers and botanicals work best for scar coverage because they offers depth, including leaves, shading and visual colors, which help to disguise the scar.

Tattoo artists should have experience with covering scars, make you feel comfortable and answer any questions you have. Look over designs and know how much time and cost is involved before you begin. Some tattoo designs may need several sessions.

Survivors should wait at least a year before tattooing any scar tissue to prevent further scarring and check with their doctor about any health precautions. While many breast cancer survivors who choose reconstructive surgery have areolas tattooed six weeks to three months after surgery, a medical professional who has experience in this specific area is needed.

During chemotherapy, tattooing should be avoided because of the threat of infection, especially in patients with low blood counts. If you have the need to profess your survivorship status on your body, a non-permanent trend is henna, a natural reddish-brown dye that fades away in about two to three weeks.