

Thinking about having a piercing or tattoo? Get the facts before you do!

If you're planning on having a piercing or tattoo, please take a few minutes to read this guidance produced by Exeter City Council's Environmental Health and Community Safety team. It explains the risks associated with these activities and tells you what to look for to ensure that your experience is as safe as possible.

Tattooing and cosmetic piercing – what's involved?

Tattooing and cosmetic piercing are methods of making a permanent change to the body for aesthetic purposes or personal expression.

Tattooing involves the insertion of pigment into the skin, leaving behind a permanent design. It's usually carried out using a single use solid needle and electric device that pulses the ink into the dermis layer of skin. (Roughly 1.5-2mm deep).

Cosmetic piercing involves making holes in the body into which jewellery is inserted. It's carried out using a single use hollow needle and sterile bio-compatible jewellery (14 or 18 carat gold, niobium or implant grade titanium). Plastic, plated metals or metals containing nickel (including some surgical steels) are not suitable for an initial body piercing.

Restrictions/Age limits

By law, you must be 18 or over to have a tattoo; it's against the law for any person to tattoo somebody under this age, even with a parent or carer present. A reputable artist will ask for ID upon completion of a consent form.

There is no legal minimum age for cosmetic piercings – it's down to the piercers' discretion and insurance provider - however a reputable piercer will not pierce anyone under the age of 16 without a parent/carer present. The exception here is genital piercings, for which you must be 18 or over.

You should be asked to sign a consent form in which you agree that you understand the procedure and give your permission for it to go ahead. You may also be asked to provide details of any relevant medical problems or medication. If you're unsure whether a medical condition makes it unsafe to have a piercing or tattoo, consult your GP.

Things to think about before getting a tattoo or piercing

Any procedure that involves breaking the skin carries risks: scarring, infection, migration, allergic reactions, side effects or an undesired outcome.

You must make sure you're aware of all the risks associated with getting a tattoo or piercing before committing to making this permanent change to your body. Although a piercing can be easily removed it can still leave behind a scar. And although tattoos can be lasered to fade this isn't a quick fix and should not be relied on as a backup plan.

Infection is a risk that can be avoided if the procedure is carried out in a sterile manner and aftercare is followed thoroughly. If at any point you are concerned you should consult your artist.

A competent piercer/tattooist will ensure that bleeding is kept to a minimum. Excessive bleeding can occur if you have a blood thinning disorder, take aspirin, anti-coagulant drugs or have consumed excessive alcohol or caffeine.

Side effects like localised pain, bleeding, bruising, swelling or discharge can be a part of the natural healing process but if you have any concerns you should consult your artist immediately.

What to look out for at the studio

Cosmetic piercers and tattooists within Exeter are required by law to be registered with Exeter City Council. Registration is only granted if the premises and the piercer/tattooist meet the standards of cleanliness and hygiene set down by the council's byelaws. By complying with the byelaws, the risks of infection are greatly reduced.

A certificate of registration must be prominently displayed on the premises, if the piercer/tattooist cannot produce one, walk away!

A sterile set up

All needles, gloves or paper products must be single use and disposed of after your procedure. Instruments like clamps should be disposable or in a sterile packet after being properly decontaminated, sterilised and processed appropriately. If you're unsure you can ask to see the studio autoclave or proof that the packet containing equipment is sterile. Body jewellery should be in a sterile packet or autoclaved in front of you during your appointment.

Tattoo equipment should be wrapped in cling film or a disposable plastic wrap and all pots of ink should be disposed of after use.

Jewellery material and options

Check that the appropriate standards are being followed. Gold or implant grade titanium should be threadless or internally threaded.

Where to go?

Firstly, you must see a professional! Do not attempt to pierce or tattoo yourselves or friends at home. Also note that professionals do not, under any circumstance tattoo at home or from a mobile unit etc. It is against the law to tattoo or pierce in an unregistered premises.

Everyone's style is different so always research your artist. Check online reviews, view their portfolio of healed and fresh tattoo/piercings. Go in and chat to the artist - you're making a permanent change to your body you should feel comfortable that you're in safe hands.

What if I'm not happy?

If you're concerned about the cleanliness or hygiene of a studio or tattooist/piercer, please contact Environmental Health and Community Safety online at [exeter.gov.uk/contact](https://www.exeter.gov.uk/contact)

If you are concerned about any medical aspects such as infection contact your artist and your GP.