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Tara S. Kerpelman/MEDILL

*When real estate broker Hajime Tai goes out in the sun, he applies sun block to protect his tattoos, such as the one of the dragon on his back.*

## Saving tattoos from the summer sun

by TARA S. KERPELMAN

July 16, 2009

In the hot summer sun, people with tattoos need extra protection from UV rays so their skin doesn't burn or camouflage skin cancer. The sun can cause tattoos to fade and, worse yet, the colors can be a hindrance to screening for cancer.

Martial arts teacher Jacquelyn Marie Braeckeveldt found out about the problems firsthand. Last year, when she was 19, she attended the Chicago Body Art Expo at Navy Pier. She had been thinking about getting a tattoo for some time and went to socialize and to scope out the artists so she could choose the best one for herself.

Braeckeveldt left the expo with a tattoo of three hearts on her foot. She had the largest one inscribed with the word "MOM" to symbolize her love for her mother and the other two honor her grandparents. Three weeks after she got her tattoo, Braeckeveldt went on a cultural exchange trip to Italy through the Elk Grove Village Sister Cities, Inc. program. In addition to discovering Italian customs, she learned her first lesson about tattoo maintenance.

"No matter what tattoo you've had or how long you've had it, you definitely need to put lotion on it or it will fade and look old," said Braeckeveldt, who now has six tattoos. "[My tattoo artist] told me to put on a high SPF lotion and make sure I took care of it when I went tanning, to the beach or to the pool to make sure it wouldn't get destroyed," she said.

Despite the warnings and the strong Sicilian sun, Braeckeveldt had difficulty keeping lotion on her foot, at the site of her triple heart tattoo, she said, because the sand just kept rubbing it off. "So I said 'Screw it. I won't put lotion on it. It's not worth it if it keeps coming off.'"

And then her tattoo started to fade.

"Especially during the healing process, the sun can do damage," said Bill Bumpas, Braeckeveldt's tattoo artist who works at Chi-Town Tattoo & Body Piercing on West Lawrence Avenue. Exposed to the sun, a healing tattoo can react badly. "It can scar and rip out scabs early," he said. If a tattoo has faded without damaging the skin, it is possible to touch up the lines and colors. Most commonly, Bumpas said, the lighter colors tend to fade a lot faster than black, but that can turn blue or green.

"Over time tattoos fade in part because the pigment is broken up into smaller pieces and the immune system takes these pigments away through the lymph nodes," said Dr. Amy Derick, a dermatologist practicing in Barrington. "This is the same thing that happens with a [Q-switch] laser, sun burns and inflammation: they cause the immune system to chew up tattoo pigment." It's the inflammation that can be caused by a sun burn that signals to the immune system to react more strongly.

Hajime Tai, a real estate broker in Chicago, has had an estimated 90 hours worth of tattooing done to his body, including a dragon, spider, butterfly and koi, among other designs, on his back and arms. He said he knows his tattoos are likely to fade just because of "life." He explained that, in the normal course of time, tattoos are exposed to sweat, water and other elements that cause the ink to bleed, or to spread. When he goes out without long sleeves, he always uses sunscreen. "I put it especially on my tattoos," Tai said.

The inability to screen effectively for skin cancer can pose another problem with tattoos. "If you have a tattoo on exposed areas – arms, back – it's hard to pick out the cancer there, Derick said. "It's not as visible so it's hard for me as a dermatologist to screen [people with tattoos] for cancer effectively." Because of this challenge, early signs of skin cancer can be overlooked. However there is no conclusive evidence in the literature so far that indicates that the interaction between the sun and tattoos is directly responsible for skin cancer, experts contend.

The same safety precautions must be taken with the practice of micropigmentation, or cosmetic tattooing. This practice was "created for people who had anomalies that they wanted to modify to feel normal," said Annette Sollars, president of Eye Want, Inc. in Wicker Park. One cosmetic tattooing procedure called areola restoration (or repigmentation) helps to create a "new" areola for people who have undergone breast surgery. The process involves injecting pigments under the skin, essentially the same method used to create decorative tattooing.

Others may also benefit from micropigmentation: People with alopecia can have eyebrows tattooed on or those with vitiligo (where areas of skin gradually lose colors) can have depigmented patches filled in. Many seek out the process for permanent makeup - indelible eyeliner or lip liner, for instance.

"It [is] an art form that started in a surgery setting and became known as paramedical tattooing," said Sollars, a certified "permanent cosmetic technician." She has been doing procedures for eight years and her most popular techniques add permanent eyebrows and lip liner.

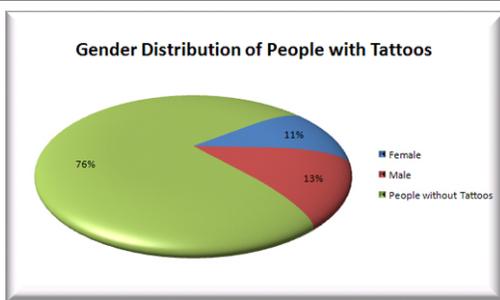
Cosmetic tattooing requires more visits than decorative tattooing, Sollars said. Usually, customers come back two to three times for the same tattoo. "I prefer to do less and lighter instead of drilling in on the first visit," she said. "You can much more easily

manipulate color and shape if you don't do too much too soon."

And after the tattoo is done, she performs color freshening or enhancing when necessary but she always recommends people use glasses and sunglasses with UV filters for protection.

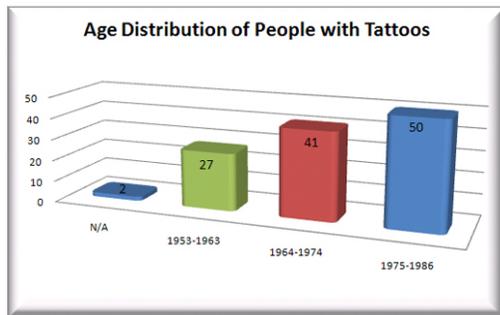
"With lotions, potions, soaps, cleansers, sprays, scrubs, UV [rays], shampoo and your body's natural ability to flush anything foreign out, [the tattoo] is going to fade," Sollars said. "It could be six months or six years."

Braeckeveldt said she doesn't have any moles that she needs to watch out for. As for her faded tattoo, she's waiting for the right time to get it touched up.



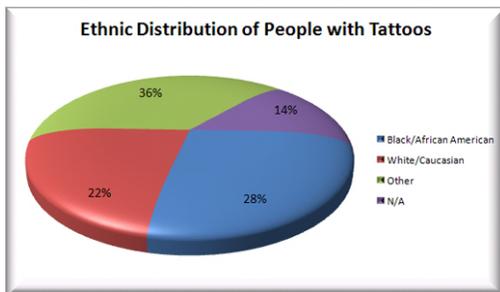
Graph by Tara S. Kerpelman/Based on data from "Tattoos and body piercings in the United States: A national data set." By A. Laumann and A. Derick in the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, June 19, 2006.

Percentage of people with tattoos out of a total of 500 respondents to a randomized national survey completed in 2004.



Graph by Tara S. Kerpelman/Based on data from "Tattoos and body piercings in the United States: A national data set." By A. Laumann and A. Derick in the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, June 19, 2006.

Ages of respondents to a randomized national survey on tattoos. Age groups are identified by birth years. Two people did not reply.



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Tattoo distribution by ethnicity based on 120 people with tattoos who participated in a randomized national survey.

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