

## TATTOOS CAN BE BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

The Canadian Forces Health Services has recently identified a case of hepatitis infection likely acquired through being tattooed in a deployment area. This report is worrisome since being tattooed while on deployment is not uncommon. This article provides factual information about the risk of infection from tattooing so that Canadian Forces' members can decide for themselves whether to be tattooed in Canada or abroad.

Tattoos - as expressions of one's personality, as works of art, as badges of honour - are common among members of the Canadian Forces (and of the general Canadian population). Unfortunately, tattoos are not free of risk, especially for certain infections transmitted through blood exposure - hepatitis B, hepatitis C and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Transmission becomes a risk if the tattooing instruments that pierce the skin and the tattoo inks are not properly protected from blood contamination from previous clients or from the tattooist, e.g. through "one use" only instruments or through proper sterilization. There are Canadian guidelines aimed at the reducing the risk of transmission in tattoo parlours and a number of public health jurisdictions in Canada inspect such parlours. While discussion with the tattooist regarding hygienic measures used may reduce the risk of infection, it cannot eliminate it. The risk is increased - likely substantially - when one is tattooed in countries which do not have the same hygienic standards as in Canada; such countries include all of the current CF deployment areas.

Infections transmitted through blood exposure, including through tattooing, are often "life long" in that the viral infection remains within the body for the rest of the person's life - this is especially so for hepatitis C and HIV infections. Such infections may lead to chronic health effects over time, e.g. liver deterioration in hepatitis C infection. Further, such infections can be transmitted to others, e.g. through sexual contact or pregnancy. Hepatitis B infection can be prevented in most (but not all) cases by hepatitis B vaccine, which is routinely used in the CF, including for deployment. There is no preventive measure (e.g. vaccine) for hepatitis C or HIV infection. There is treatment for certain stages of hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV infections; however, such treatment can be associated with unpleasant side-effects and does not necessarily rid the body of the virus.

**The only way to ensure that tattooing does not give you an infection is by not getting a tattoo!!!!** However, if you decide to get tattooed, especially (but not only) when on deployment the following should be considered in choosing a specific tattooist:

- a. are the instruments that contact the skin sterilized? If properly done, "autoclaving" using high temperature heat, steam and pressure, will likely kill the viruses and bacteria. Other methods, e.g. dry heat, boiling, soaking in chemicals, cannot be trusted to eliminate microbes.
- b. is the "needles bar", which is dipped into the ink and introduces the ink into the skin, disposed of after one use? Reusing the "needles bar", even

when subjected to a measure to eliminate microbes, presents a risk for transmission of infection.

- c. are the ointments, pigments (ink), gloves and razor blades only use once and then discarded?
- d. does the tattooist wear latex gloves at all time when in contact with your skin and are the gloves disposed of after each client?

If you do get tattooed where the criteria above are not fully met OR you are not sure if the criteria are fully met OR, regardless of criteria above being met, if the tattoo was acquired while on deployment, it is recommended that you seriously consider being tested for hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV infection after return to Canada. Such testing, if you feel well (as in most cases of newly acquired infection), should be done about 6-8 weeks after the tattoo was applied. Since these infections, especially hepatitis B and HIV, can be transmitted through sexual contact, it is prudent to avoid such contact until you have the results of the testing.

From a disease prevention view, given the risk of transmission of blood viruses as well as the risk of skin infection and scarring, tattooing is strongly DISCOURAGED, whether in Canada or abroad. However, after taking the above information into account, the choice to be tattooed rests with the member.