

Interview transcript with Dr. Neil Black
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Trust]

1. What are the risks of someone that is actively omitting insulin in getting a tattoo or piercing?

If you are well and have a good level of diabetes control (HbA1c), then the risks of getting a tattoo or a body piercing from a parlour is the same as someone who doesn't have diabetes. The higher your HbA1c or average glucose, the greater your risk of infection of the tattoo area or piercing before it heals. This can be painful and can even be disfiguring and disrupt the tattoo or prevent use of the piercing. Tattoos and piercings will also take longer to heal, putting them of greater risk again of infection.

2. Have you seen any cases whereby someone has gone ahead with a tattoo or piercing with uncontrolled diabetes and ended up in danger? If so, without being specific about individuals of course, can you explain what happened?

Personally, I have seen cellulitis (spreading infection of the skin) after tattooing in someone with uncontrolled diabetes. As that person sought help early, we were able to treat it effectively and prevent any permanent skin damage / disfigurement. The tattoo survived, but they chose not to go through further tattoos. That was a good example of someone 'listening' to their body and responding to risks. Others have had tattoos and been fine and still others have decided not to go ahead with it.

3. Why does infection occur more often people with type 1 diabetes when blood sugar levels are uncontrolled?

Firstly, wounds heal more slowly so they are open to infection for longer. Secondly, the immune system is weaker and so the body can't defend itself as well when infection gets introduced. When you look at white blood cells under a microscope, they move around on the slide. When they are surrounded by higher glucose levels, they move more slowly, like they are 'drugged'. In this way, they won't repair cells and can't help healing or fight infection as well.

4. Should health professionals be discussing these risks with young type 1's (the typical age group getting tattoos and piercings) more? Do you raise the topic with patients that you see?

If asked, we do advise people living with type 1 to wait until their body is in a better place where risks are lower, before having tattoos or piercings. We don't volunteer that information to everyone.

5. What advice would you give to someone that has an eating disorder with uncontrolled diabetes but is still stubbornly determined to get a tattoo or piercing despite the risks? What can they do to try to keep themselves out of danger so far as they possibly can?

Choose a reputable parlour with hygiene levels that you are happy with. This includes general cleanliness, that they use sterile (single-use) needles and disposable ink bottles. This is mostly

the case, unless the tattooist or person who does the piercing is at a casual venue like at a festival – avoid these.

Choose lower risk areas of the body. Certain areas of the body are more prone to infection and slower healing than others, such as ankles, feet, shins and buttocks. Common insulin injection sites can be problematic as well as that can distort the tattoo and infection is more likely again. Some people are more prone than others, so take particular precaution if you are prone to skin infection.

Wait until you get your diabetes control a little better. This isn't well studied in tattooing or piercing. No single level of average glucose or HbA1c can rule in or out safe tattooing or piercing. Certain levels of HbA1c or average glucose can be quoted as indicators of particularly high risk of infection, just as 8.5% (70mmol/mol) or average glucose or about 11mmol/L is taken as a level to advise someone to avoid pregnancy. The relationship between HbA1c and average glucose is very different from person to person and depends on differences in metabolism as well as glucose checking habits. Any reduction in HbA1c or average glucose will reduce risks, but it is particularly meaningful if HbA1c falls by at least 1% (11mmol/mol) or average glucose by 1-2mmol/L.

6. Any additional comments?

Lots of people who live with diabetes type 1 have tattoos or piercings and have been fine. Just take care and plan it. If something goes wrong, ask for help early.

Thank you so much Neil!