

Invisible ink

Tattoos have never been more popular, but what are your options if you regret your colourful past? There's a way – if you and your wallet can stand the pain



Peaches Geldof (left) has 20; David Beckham has 16 (and counting); Tory leader David Cameron's wife Samantha has one. Even Barbie has them – a new doll has been released complete with tiny stickers to put on her body. Tattoos, once the preserve of bikers and sailors, are now a fashion accessory and celebrity style staple.

According to a poll carried out in 2006, one in four American adults now has at least one example of body art, and many have more, sharing David Beckham's view that tattoos are a way of "expressing their feelings". In the UK, the number of tattoo studios has grown from around 50 in the 1970s to more than 1,000 today.

The trouble is, unlike the latest handbag or haircut, you can't just ditch them when you've had enough. And tattoo removal is still more costly – and arguably just as painful – as having them inked on in the first place.

Together forever?

Tattoo artists often say that their work lasts longer than any relationship – as many have learned to their cost. Johnny Depp famously had his "Winona Forever" tattoo changed to "Wino Forever" after splitting up with Winona Ryder, while Denise Richards covered ex-husband Charlie Sheen's name with a colourful fairy. Angelina Jolie, a big fan of body art, had her "Billy Bob" tattoo – in honour of second husband Billy Bob Thornton – lasered away after their split, replacing it with the birth coordinates of each of her children.

Perhaps not surprisingly, tattoo removal is as big as creating the

The most effective way is laser tattoo removal, where an intense beam of light is pulsed through the top layers of skin into the tattoo pigment, breaking it down into tiny fragments. These are then picked up by the bloodstream and lymphatic system and removed. It is a gradual process, with most tattoos taking between six and ten sessions to completely disappear, usually at a cost of £70 to £100 a time.

Simple, single-ink designs in black or red are fairly easy to get rid of this way, but more elaborate multicoloured designs are trickier to change your mind about, especially if they incorporate green, yellow or purple ink, which is harder for the laser to break down.

In some cases, even if removal's been successful, a little ghosting of pigment can remain. Look closely at Angelina's arm and you'll see faint traces of her previous tattoo beneath the coordinates she's had inked over the top. The reason for this may be that the ink of the original is lying too far below the skin's surface for the laser to reach it.

Goodbye to all tats

The treatment can feel a bit like being splashed with hot fat, but you can have a local anaesthetic, either by injection or applied as a cream under a dressing, one to two hours beforehand.

It's vital that the treatment is carried out by someone experienced in the use of lasers for tattoo removal. SK:N Clinics' Dr Tom Bozak, who offers tattoo removal at clinics nationwide and has seen an increase in demand for the treatment, advises: "Anyone who wants to have laser removal must consult a doctor or nurse to ensure that the correct laser is used to target the pigments, and that the correct setting is used on that laser."

Dr Patrick Bowler, founder of Court House Clinics, also has these recommendations:

- Have a laser test first to check for any unusual reactions; some tattoos made with cheap ink contain impurities and can react to the laser by going darker.
- Don't have your tattoos cut out

other than black or red you need to go to a clinic with more than one type of laser for successful removal.

For more information

Visit courthouseclinics.com or sknclinics.co.uk. At SK:N, tattoo removal starts at £79 a session, with at least six required for complete pigment removal.



Angelina Jolie replaced her ex's name with the birth coordinates of her six children



"I'll never have a man's name tattooed on me"