Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

About Your Nipple and Areola Tattoo Procedure: What You Should Know

This information will help you get ready for your nipple and areola tattoo procedure at MSK. Your areola is the circle around your nipple.

Read this notice and disclaimer before viewing our before and after photos

MSK has photos for educational purposes only that may not be suitable for all viewers. Our website has graphic medical photos of breasts with nipple and areola tattoos. Please be prepared to see this type of content before you visit our website at www.mskcc.org/pe/nipple_tattoos. All patients gave their permission to use their photos only on our website.

What is a nipple and areola tattoo?

A nipple and areola tattoo is a real tattoo of a nipple and areola on your breast. The tattoo is permanent (does not come off). It will help recreate your nipple and areola and is the last part of your breast reconstruction.

What is the difference between a nipple reconstruction tattoo and a 3D tattoo?

A nipple reconstruction is a procedure to rebuild and raise your nipple. If you have this procedure, skin and tissue from your breast are used to form a new, raised nipple. Later on, the reconstructed nipple is tattooed with color and an areola is tattooed around it. To learn more, ask your healthcare provider or read

Nipple Reconstruction (www.mskcc.org/pe/nipple-reconstruction).

If you do not have a nipple reconstruction procedure, you can get a 3D tattoo of a nipple. A 3D tattoo adds color and shading to your breast to make the nipple look like it's raised. The tattooed nipple is flat to the touch, like a normal tattoo, but looks like a natural nipple.

When should I get my tattoo?

A nipple and areola tattoo can be done after breast and nipple reconstruction surgery. You'll need to wait about 12 months (1 year) after your final breast reconstruction procedure to get your tattoo. This will give your skin enough time to heal and your reconstruction enough time to fully settle into place.

Who will do my tattoo procedure?

Nipple and areola tattoos are done by physician assistants (PAs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) with special training in tattooing. They have a tattoo license. They use a handheld tattoo machine like the one used for other tattoos.

Does insurance cover my tattoo procedure?

Some health plans, including Medicare, may cover nipple and areola tattooing under certain conditions. Call your health insurance company for more information.

What to know before your nipple and areola tattoo procedure

Nipple and breast reconstruction

If you plan to have nipple reconstruction, you'll need to have it done before your tattoo procedure. Having nipple reconstruction after your tattoo procedure will affect the quality of your tattoo.

If you have nipple reconstruction, your skin needs to heal for least 6 months before your tattoo procedure. Your nipple reconstruction scar will not take color until it's fully healed.

If you had breast reconstruction surgery on just 1 of your breasts, we'll only

tattoo that breast. We cannot change the color or size of your other natural nipple or areola. We'll try to make both areolas as similar as possible.

Make other changes to your breast before your tattoo procedure

Talk with your plastic surgeon if you want to make any other changes to your breast. This includes changing the position of your implant, changing the type of implant, or making a scar less visible. In most cases, you'll need to have these procedures done before your nipple and areola tattoo procedure.

The day of your nipple and areola tattoo procedure

Things to remember

- Take your daily medicines as usual, including blood thinners.
- You can shower the morning of your procedure. Do not put any lotion, cream, oil, or powder on your skin from your waist up.
- Wear a loose-fitting, comfortable top. You may also want to wear a loose-fitting bra to avoid putting pressure on the tattoo.
- Arrive on time. If you arrive more than 15 minutes late, your appointment may be rescheduled. We want to give each patient enough time and attention for the best tattoo results.
- There's a high demand for this procedure. If you need to cancel or reschedule your appointment, please let us know as soon as possible.

What to expect when you come to the hospital

After you change into a hospital gown, your PA or NP will talk with you about:

- Any concerns you have about pain during your tattoo procedure.
- What you want your nipple and areola to look like.
- Where you want your nipple and areola to be placed.
- What color would look most natural for your skin tone.

Then, your PA or NP will mix the tattoo ink until they make a color you both like. If you only have 1 breast reconstructed, they'll try to match your natural nipple as closely as possible.

- **If you had nipple reconstruction:** Your PA or NP will tattoo the reconstructed nipple and a circular area to recreate the areola.
- **If you did not have nipple reconstruction:** Your PA or NP will use color and shading to make the tattoo look like a natural nipple. The tattoo will not be raised but will look 3D.

What does getting a nipple and areola tattoo feel like? Does it hurt?

After your mastectomy, it's common to have lost feeling in your breasts. Most people only feel pressure or vibration during their tattoo procedure.

Topical anesthetic (medicine to numb your skin) can affect the color of your tattoo. Because of this, we do not recommend using it unless you need to.

How many appointments will it take to finish my tattoo?

Most people need 2 appointments to finish their tattoo. Each appointment will be scheduled for 2 hours.

Your second tattoo appointment will be about 3 to 6 months after your first appointment.

During your second appointment, you'll have either:

- More detail added to the nipple and areola.
- More color added to the areola.

You'll talk more about this with the PA or NP who will work on your tattoo at your second appointment. This may or may not be the same person from your first appointment.

For both appointments, follow the same instructions to get ready for and recover from your tattoo procedure.

Recovery after your nipple and areola tattoo procedure

After your PA or NP is done tattooing, they'll place a Tegaderm™ plastic dressing over your tattoo. They'll teach you how to care for your tattoo and give you the resource *Instructions for After Your Nipple and Areola Tattoo Procedure* (www.mskcc.org/pe/after-nipple-tattoo). Follow the instructions in the resource, along with the instructions from your PA or NP.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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