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# image | think before you ink

by Linda Bertaut

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**I**t turns out that repeated viewings of Bollywood films can actually harm you. The trendy, Indian-inspired henna tattoos that are being sold everywhere from street fairs to cruise ships can cause permanent damage to your skin. If the tattoo is black instead of the earth tone of natural henna, the ink could be supercharged for more intense color and duration, containing a harmful chemical known as paraphenylenediamine (PPD).

Natural henna has a red, green or brown color and is made from the leaves of the *lawsonia inermis* plant. Temporary dyeing of the skin with this natural coloring is considered harmless and only lasts for a few days.

The problem is that certain henna artists found a way to increase the intensity of the tattoo color and prolong the visibility of the tattoo from a few days to two to three weeks. They are adding PPD, which is commonly used for black hair dye. If you have ever dyed hair, you know that the dye is not supposed to touch the skin and that gloves must be worn during application.

## Kids at risk

According to dermatologist Sharon E. Jacob, M.D., F.A.A.D., assistant clinical professor of pediatrics and medicine (dermatology) at the University of California, San Diego, CA, black henna is very dangerous. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prohibits the direct application of PPD to the skin because of its known health risks.

However, the tattoo industry is not regulated, causing people's continued exposure to serious medical problems.

"Perhaps the most alarming issue we are seeing with black henna tattoos is the increase in the number of children—even children as young as four—who are getting them and experiencing skin reactions," says Dr. Jacob. "Kids make up a significant portion of the population that receives temporary tattoos because parents mistakenly think they are safe, since they are not permanent and are available at so many popular venues catering to families. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth."

## Allergy alert

There have been hundreds of reports of allergic contact dermatitis from black henna tattoos, causing reactions from mild eczema and blistering to permanent scarring. The amount of scarring depends on the depth and severity of the inflammation. Topical steroids can be used to stop the reaction, but the damage from the exposure may already be done.

Just one reaction can cause a lifelong sensitivity to PPD. The immune system remembers the chemical, causing not only an allergy to many hair dyes, but a cross reaction to other compounds, including certain medications. After one allergic reaction the door could be left open for reactions later in life to medications for the heart, hypertension and diabetes, as well as some anesthetics used in topical hemorrhoid preparations or oral gels. According to



Dr. Jacob, "Each time you are exposed to black henna, you increase your risk of developing a lifelong allergy to it."

Be aware that when it comes to skin art, the FDA cannot protect you. When considering whether to get a henna tattoo at the next Renaissance fair, ask the artist what is in the dye. If he or she cannot tell you, move on to the jousting tournament—it just may be less hazardous to your health. ■

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