

The Complete Tattoo Aftercare Handbook

A practical guide to tattoo healing, recovery and long-term care.

Written by Davids Strods

Foreword

Tattoo aftercare has become one of the most confusing parts of the entire tattoo experience.

Search the internet and you'll find hundreds of articles, thousands of videos and countless opinions—many of them directly contradicting one another.

One person tells you to keep your tattoo dry.

Another tells you to moisturise it every few hours.

Someone says puncture the healing film.

Someone else says never touch it.

For somebody simply trying to look after a fresh tattoo, it quickly becomes overwhelming.

This handbook was created to cut through that confusion.

It brings together the aftercare protocol I have developed through years of professional tattooing, observing thousands of healed tattoos and continually refining my approach to achieve consistent, predictable results.

Rather than simply telling you what to do, this guide explains **why** each step matters.

When you understand how your tattoo heals, you're far more likely to make good decisions throughout the healing process.

Although this handbook reflects my own methods and professional experience, it is equally intended to help anyone wanting a better understanding of tattoo healing, regardless of who created their tattoo.

If your own tattoo artist has given you a specific aftercare routine, always respect their instructions and follow their protocol consistently from beginning to end.

My hope is that this guide helps you heal your tattoo with confidence, avoid common mistakes and enjoy your artwork for many years to come.

Davids Strods

SECTION 1 — WELCOME

Welcome

Firstly, thank you for trusting me with your tattoo.

Whether this is your first tattoo or your fiftieth, proper aftercare plays a significant role in how your tattoo heals, how comfortable the healing process is, and how your tattoo will look for years to come.

Every tattoo creates a controlled injury to the skin. My job is to create the tattoo with as little trauma as possible while achieving the best artistic result. Your job begins once you leave the studio.

The vast majority of healing problems I see are not caused by tattooing itself, but by accidental damage during the healing process. Fortunately, almost all of these problems can be avoided with good aftercare.

This guide explains not only **what** I recommend, but also **why** I recommend it. Understanding the reasoning behind each step makes it much easier to recognise what is normal, what isn't, and how to give your tattoo the best possible chance of healing beautifully.

Every Person Heals Differently

No two people heal in exactly the same way.

Your healing may be influenced by many factors, including:

- Your immune system.
- Your age.
- Your general health.
- Sleep quality.
- Nutrition.
- Hydration.
- Smoking or nicotine use.
- Alcohol consumption.
- Certain medications.
- The location of the tattoo.
- How much movement that area experiences.
- Sun exposure.
- Your occupation.
- Previous skin conditions.

Because of this, your tattoo may not heal exactly like someone else's—even if the tattoos were done on the same day.

Small differences are completely normal.

My Approach

Every tattoo I create is approached with one long-term goal:

To produce the best possible tattoo not only on the day it is finished, but years after it has healed.

That philosophy extends far beyond the artwork itself.

The products I use, my skin preparation, my tattooing technique, the way I apply medical film and the advice in this guide are all chosen to minimise unnecessary trauma to the skin and encourage predictable healing.

When you follow these instructions, you're giving your tattoo the best possible environment to heal as intended.

Your Responsibility

Once you leave the studio, the healing process is largely in your hands.

Following this guide carefully will significantly reduce the chances of complications and help your tattoo heal cleanly.

Healing isn't about doing more—it's about doing the right things consistently.

One of the most common mistakes people make is interfering with the healing process by washing too often, applying too much cream, picking at peeling skin or exposing the tattoo to unnecessary irritation.

In most cases, your skin already knows how to heal. Your job is simply to avoid getting in its way.

If You Have Any Concerns

I'd always rather answer a simple question than have you worry unnecessarily.

If at any point you're unsure whether something is healing normally, please get in touch.

If possible, include:

- Clear photographs taken in natural light.
- A photo showing the whole tattoo.
- A close-up of the area you're concerned about.
- A brief description of your symptoms.
- When the symptoms started.

This allows me to assess the situation far more accurately than words alone.

If I believe your tattoo requires medical attention, I'll tell you immediately. Your health always comes first.

A Final Note

This guide is based on my own experience, preferred healing methods, and the protocols I use in my studio. It has been written to support clients who have been tattooed by me and follows the techniques and products I work with every day.

While many of the principles apply to tattoos in general, always follow the advice of your own artist if you were tattooed elsewhere, as different techniques and healing methods may require different aftercare.

SECTION 2 — UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUR TATTOO HEALS

Before we get into the aftercare itself, it helps to understand what your skin is actually doing over the coming weeks.

A fresh tattoo isn't simply coloured skin—it's skin that has undergone a controlled injury. Every tattoo, regardless of size or style, triggers your body's natural healing response. The goal of good aftercare isn't to "make" the tattoo heal; your body already knows how to do that. The goal is to provide the best possible environment for your body to heal efficiently while protecting the artwork.

What Happens During Tattooing?

A tattoo machine places pigment into the **dermis**, the layer of skin beneath the outer epidermis.

Your immune system immediately recognises that the skin has been injured and begins repairing the area. Blood flow increases, immune cells move into the tattoo, damaged tissue begins to repair itself, and excess pigment is gradually cleared away.

The pigment that remains trapped within the dermis becomes your healed tattoo.

This entire process continues long after your tattoo appears healed on the surface.

Healing Happens in Stages

Healing isn't one single event. Your body moves through several overlapping phases.

Stage One – Inflammation

Approximately Days 0–3

Immediately after your tattoo is completed, your body begins its inflammatory response.

During this stage it is perfectly normal to experience:

- Mild redness
- Warmth
- Slight swelling
- Tenderness
- Small amounts of blood or plasma
- Tightness

This is your immune system doing exactly what it's supposed to do.

Inflammation is often misunderstood as something bad, but in healthy amounts it is essential for proper healing.

Stage Two – Skin Repair

Approximately Days 3–10

Once the initial inflammation begins to settle, your body starts rebuilding the damaged skin.

During this stage you may notice:

- Dry skin
- Peeling
- Flaking
- Mild itching
- A dull or cloudy appearance

Many people worry that their tattoo looks faded during this period.

It isn't.

A thin layer of healing skin temporarily sits over the pigment, making the colours appear softer or slightly milky. As this layer matures, clarity gradually returns.

Stage Three – Skin Maturation

Approximately Weeks 2–6

By this point the surface of the skin often appears healed.

However, deeper layers of skin continue reorganising and strengthening.

The tattoo will usually become:

- Brighter
- Clearer
- More even in appearance

Although your tattoo may look finished after two or three weeks, your skin is still healing beneath the surface.

Why Tattoos Peel

One of the most common concerns is peeling.

Peeling is completely normal.

During healing your body sheds damaged surface skin and replaces it with new healthy skin.

Think of it like recovering from mild sunburn.

The important difference is this:

Healthy peeling comes away naturally.

You should never help it along.

Pulling peeling skin away before it is ready can remove healing tissue prematurely and increase the risk of patchy healing or unnecessary trauma.

Why Tattoos Itch

Itching is another completely normal part of healing.

As new skin forms, nerve endings regenerate and the skin becomes drier, producing the familiar itchy sensation.

As tempting as it may be:

Do not scratch your tattoo.

Instead, gently moisturise if appropriate, lightly tap around the area if necessary, or simply allow the sensation to pass.

Scratching creates unnecessary trauma and may damage healing skin.

Why Less Is Often More

Many people assume tattoos heal better if they're constantly cleaned, covered in cream or left to "breathe."

In reality, over-treating a tattoo is one of the most common causes of unnecessary healing problems.

Your skin has evolved to repair itself remarkably well.

The best aftercare usually involves:

- Keeping the tattoo clean.
- Protecting it from contamination.
- Keeping it lightly moisturised when appropriate.
- Avoiding unnecessary irritation.
- Allowing your body to do the rest.

Healing isn't improved by using more products.

It's improved by avoiding anything that interferes with your body's natural repair process.

My Goal During Healing

Everything I do—from how I tattoo, to how I prepare your skin before applying medical film—is designed with one objective:

To minimise unnecessary trauma and create the best possible conditions for predictable healing.

A tattoo that experiences less trauma generally heals:

- More comfortably.
- With less inflammation.
- With less scabbing.
- With less peeling.
- With better colour retention.
- With a lower risk of complications.

Once you leave the studio, following the aftercare in this guide helps continue that same philosophy until your tattoo is fully healed.

Why I Use Medical Healing Film

Every client I tattoo leaves the studio with a medical-grade healing film unless there is a specific reason not to.

Over the years, I've found this to be the most predictable and comfortable method of healing for the vast majority of clients.

When everything goes as intended, medical film helps to:

- Protect the tattoo from external contamination.
- Reduce friction from clothing.
- Minimise unnecessary scabbing.
- Reduce drying of the skin.
- Create a stable healing environment.
- Make the first few days considerably more comfortable.

It isn't "magic", and it doesn't replace proper aftercare, but when used correctly it gives your tattoo an excellent start to the healing process.

My Application Protocol

Not every artist prepares the skin in the same way before applying healing film.

Before your dressing is applied, I follow my own preparation protocol that has been refined over years of experience and thousands of healed tattoos.

The aim is simple:

To achieve the strongest possible adhesion while giving your tattoo the best environment to begin healing.

Because of this protocol, **most of my clients are able to wear their healing film comfortably for 4–6 days without changing it**, provided the dressing remains completely sealed.

This recommendation applies **only to tattoos completed by me using my application protocol**.

If you have been tattooed elsewhere, always follow your own artist's instructions.

What You'll See Under the Film

The first time someone heals with medical film, they often think something has gone terribly wrong.

It hasn't.

During the first few days it is completely normal for fluid to collect beneath the dressing.

This usually consists of:

- Plasma.
- Small amounts of blood.
- Excess surface pigment.
- Lymphatic fluid.

As these fluids mix together, they often create what looks like a large pocket of black, brown or dark purple liquid underneath the dressing.

Although it may look alarming, this is completely normal.

This is not your tattoo "leaking out."

The pigment that forms your healed tattoo sits within the dermis.

The fluid beneath the dressing is simply excess material your body was never going to keep.

No matter how unpleasant it looks...

Leave it alone.

What Is Plasma?

Plasma is a completely normal part of wound healing.

It is a clear fluid produced by your body that transports proteins, nutrients and immune cells to injured tissue.

Because it mixes with tiny amounts of blood and excess pigment, it rarely looks clear once trapped beneath the dressing.

Instead it often appears:

- Black.
- Grey.
- Brown.
- Purple.

This is exactly what I expect to see.

Keep the Film Completely Dry

This is one area where **my protocol differs from much of the advice you'll find online.**

Many manufacturers describe medical healing film as waterproof.

While that may be true of the material itself, **my concern isn't whether the film can get wet—it's whether the seal remains absolutely perfect.**

Every time the dressing is exposed to tap water, there is an opportunity for the adhesive seal to weaken or become compromised.

Sometimes this is obvious.

Sometimes it isn't.

For that reason, **I recommend keeping the dressing completely dry for the entire time you are wearing it.**

If possible, avoid showers altogether while wearing the dressing.

A bath where the tattoo remains completely out of the water is the safest option.

If you do need to shower, ensure **no water comes into contact with the healing film at any point.**

This protocol has consistently produced excellent healing results for my clients, which is why I continue to recommend it.

If You Think Water Has Got Underneath

This is very simple.

If you have **any suspicion whatsoever** that tap water has entered beneath the dressing...

Remove it immediately.

Do not leave it on to "see if it's okay."

Do not assume it's probably plasma.

Do not try to dry it out.

Once tap water has entered beneath the film, the protected healing environment has been compromised.

At that point the dressing has done its job.

Remove it, wash the tattoo thoroughly using the cleaning instructions in the next section, and continue healing using the Dry Healing Method.

When in doubt—

Take it off.

What Is Normal While Wearing the Film?

The following are completely normal:

- Tightness.
- Mild itching.
- Warmth during the first couple of days.
- Fluid collecting beneath the dressing.
- Wrinkles in the film.
- Slight cloudiness.
- Small air pockets.
- A feeling that the tattoo is "sweating."

None of these are reasons to remove the dressing.

Exercise

For the first few days, avoid activities that produce excessive sweating or repeated friction over the tattoo.

Heavy sweating can reduce the adhesive's ability to remain securely attached.

The longer the dressing remains perfectly sealed, the better it protects your healing tattoo.

Normal day-to-day activities are absolutely fine.

We'll discuss returning to exercise in more detail later in this guide.

Never Puncture the Film

Some people are tempted to release the fluid trapped beneath the dressing by making a small hole.

Do not do this.

You may come across videos, social media posts or advice from other tattoo artists suggesting that you can simply puncture the dressing, drain the fluid and apply another piece of healing film over the top.

Do not follow that advice for a tattoo completed by me.

My aftercare protocol has been developed around the way I tattoo, the way I prepare your skin and the way I apply your dressing. Once that dressing has been punctured, cut, peeled back or otherwise compromised, it is no longer part of that protocol.

Applying another piece of film over the top does not restore the protected healing environment the original dressing provided.

The tattoo industry is full of conflicting advice. Some of it is excellent. Some of it is outdated. Some of it is based purely on personal opinion or social media trends rather than consistent long-term results.

By choosing me as your artist, you've also chosen to trust my experience, my healing protocol and the methods that have consistently produced the results you've seen in my portfolio. Mixing my aftercare with advice from YouTube, TikTok, Facebook groups or random online comments only increases the chances of something going wrong.

For tattoos completed by me, follow **one protocol from start to finish**—mine.

If your dressing has been punctured, has started leaking, or its seal has been compromised in any way:

- Remove it completely.
- Wash the tattoo following the cleaning instructions in this guide.
- Continue healing using the Dry Healing Method.

Do not puncture the dressing.

Do not drain the fluid.

Do not tape it back down.

Do not cover it with cling film.

Do not apply another piece of healing film unless I have specifically instructed you to do so.

When Should I Remove the Film?

Remove your dressing immediately if:

- It begins leaking.
- The adhesive seal has been broken.
- Water has entered underneath.
- A large section lifts away from your skin.
- You develop a genuine allergic reaction to the adhesive.

Once any of these occur, the dressing has finished doing its job.

Remove it and continue with the Dry Healing Method.

How Long Should I Leave It On?

Provided the dressing remains completely sealed and dry...

Leave it in place for 4–6 days.

There is no benefit to removing it early simply because it looks unpleasant.

In fact, unnecessary removal usually interrupts the healing process rather than improving it.

Trust the process.

Removing the Dressing

The easiest way to remove your dressing is after allowing the adhesive to soften naturally from your body heat. If needed, a warm bath may help soften the adhesive, **provided the tattoo itself remains out of the water.**

Slowly stretch the dressing back over itself rather than pulling it directly away from your skin. Supporting the surrounding skin with your free hand will make removal considerably more comfortable.

Once the dressing has been removed:

1. Wash the tattoo thoroughly using the cleansing product provided in your aftercare pack. If you are purchasing products yourself, I recommend **Octenisan® Wash Lotion**. Lather the tattoo generously and allow the cleanser to remain on the skin for approximately **60 seconds** before rinsing thoroughly with clean, lukewarm water.
2. Gently pat the tattoo dry using **clean paper towels only**. **Do not use bath towels, face towels, flannels, sponges or reusable cloths**. Even freshly washed towels can harbour bacteria, lint and detergent residues that have no place on a fresh tattoo.
3. Allow the tattoo to air dry naturally. Do not rush this stage. Allow the skin to dry until it begins to feel naturally dry and you can feel a slight sense of tightness or tension across the tattoo. This is your indication that excess surface moisture has evaporated and the skin is ready for the next stage.
4. Continue with the **Dry Healing Method** described in the following section.

If Your Dressing Comes Off Early

Don't panic.

Sometimes dressings fail because of:

- High movement areas.
- Heavy sweating.
- Individual skin chemistry.
- Body hair.
- Accidental snagging.

This does **not** mean anything has gone wrong with your tattoo.

Simply begin the Dry Healing Method and continue following the rest of this guide.

SECTION 4 — THE DRY HEALING METHOD

The Dry Healing Method begins once your medical healing film has been removed or, if the film has failed before the recommended removal time, immediately after you have cleaned the tattoo.

This stage is intentionally simple.

One of the biggest misconceptions in tattoo aftercare is that more products, more washing and more moisturiser will produce better healing.

They won't.

Your body already knows how to heal your tattoo. Your job is to provide a clean environment, protect the skin from unnecessary trauma and avoid interfering with the healing process.

Your Daily Routine

For the first week after removing the dressing, your routine should remain consistent.

The process is always the same:

1. Wash the tattoo.
2. Dry the tattoo completely.
3. Moisturise only when appropriate.
4. Leave it alone.

Simple routines produce the best healing.

Washing Your Tattoo

Wash your tattoo **once in the morning and once in the evening**.

Additional washing is only necessary if the tattoo becomes genuinely dirty.

For example:

- Sweat from heavy exercise.
- Dust or dirt from work.
- Contact with animals.
- Contact with contaminated surfaces.

Avoid washing your tattoo repeatedly throughout the day "just because."

Excessive washing strips the skin of natural oils, delays recovery and repeatedly disturbs the healing process.

What Should I Wash With?

I recommend using the cleanser supplied in your aftercare pack.

If you are purchasing your own products, I recommend **Octenisan® Wash Lotion**.

Wet the tattoo using clean, lukewarm water.

Apply enough cleanser to create a gentle lather across the entire tattoo.

Allow the cleanser to remain on the skin for approximately **60 seconds** before rinsing thoroughly.

This contact time allows the cleanser to work as intended.

Do not scrub.

Do not use brushes.

Do not use flannels.

Do not use sponges.

Clean Gently—Not Timidly

Throughout this guide, you'll see me recommend cleaning your tattoo **gently with your hands**.

That does **not** mean barely touching it.

It does **not** mean lightly gliding your fingertips over the surface and hoping for the best.

And it certainly does **not** mean leaving dried plasma, moisturiser, soap residue or other debris on the tattoo because you're afraid to clean it properly.

Your hands should always be clean, and your movements should be controlled and deliberate.

Work the cleanser across the entire tattoo using your fingertips, making sure every part of the tattoo has been thoroughly cleaned before rinsing it away completely.

Think of it this way:

Be gentle with the skin, but be thorough with the cleaning.

These are not the same thing.

This is especially important if your healing film has come off during the first few days, when the tattoo is still tender.

A tender tattoo still needs to be cleaned properly.

Yes, it may feel uncomfortable.

No, that is **not** a reason to avoid cleaning it thoroughly.

Leaving behind dried plasma, excess ink, soap residue or other contaminants will do far more harm to the healing process than a few moments of temporary discomfort while washing it correctly.

Be confident.

Be methodical.

Clean it properly every time.

Drying the Tattoo

After washing:

Gently pat the tattoo dry using **clean paper towels only**.

Never rub the tattoo.

Rubbing creates unnecessary friction and damages healing skin.

Allow the tattoo to continue air drying naturally until the surface no longer feels damp and the skin begins to develop a slight feeling of natural tightness.

Only once the tattoo has reached this stage should moisturiser be applied.

Moisturising

This is probably where the majority of people make mistakes.

More moisturiser does not mean better healing.

Fresh tattoos need oxygen.

Applying excessive cream keeps the surface permanently wet, softens healing skin unnecessarily and interferes with normal recovery.

Your tattoo should never look shiny because of moisturiser.

It should never feel greasy.

It should never have visible cream sitting on the surface.

How Much Moisturiser Should I Apply?

Less than you think.

Apply a **very small amount** of moisturiser.

Massage it into the tattoo for approximately **20 seconds** until it has been fully absorbed.

If you can still see cream sitting on the surface afterwards...

You have used too much.

Remove the excess using a clean paper towel.

Your skin should feel comfortable—not wet.

How Often Should I Moisturise?

Moisturise **only when your skin feels dry**.

Not because the clock says so.

Not because somebody online told you to moisturise five times a day.

Listen to your skin.

Some people naturally produce more oil than others.

Some tattoos require moisturiser slightly more often.

Others hardly need any at all.

Dry skin benefits from moisturiser.

Already hydrated skin does not.

If Your Tattoo Feels Tight

A feeling of tightness is completely normal.

It does **not** automatically mean your tattoo needs cream.

Fresh skin naturally tightens as it heals.

If the tattoo is simply tight but otherwise comfortable, leave it alone.

If the skin begins feeling excessively dry or uncomfortable, apply a very small amount of moisturiser.

What Products Should I Avoid?

Do not apply:

- Petroleum jelly.
- Vaseline.
- Hydrogen peroxide.
- Surgical spirit.
- Alcohol-based products.
- Heavily fragranced creams.
- Essential oils.
- Home remedies.
- Random products suggested by social media.

Your tattoo is healing perfectly well without experimenting.

Stick to products that have been recommended for fresh tattoos.

Bepanthen

Many people still recommend Bepanthen because it was widely used in tattoo aftercare years ago.

I do not recommend it.

Formulations vary between countries and many versions contain ingredients that are unnecessary for fresh tattoos, including petroleum-based components that can leave the skin feeling excessively occlusive.

There are now better products available that have been developed specifically for wound care and sensitive skin.

Overcare Is Just as Harmful as Undercare

One of the biggest misconceptions in tattoo aftercare is that doing **more** will produce **better** healing.

It won't.

The purpose of aftercare is **not** to make your tattoo heal.

The purpose of aftercare is to avoid interfering with the healing process while protecting your tattoo from unnecessary trauma and contamination.

Ironically, many healing problems don't happen because people neglect their tattoo.

They happen because people simply can't leave it alone.

Common Forms of Overcare

Overcare often includes things like:

- Washing the tattoo every couple of hours.
- Applying moisturiser every time the tattoo feels slightly dry.
- Constantly checking it in the mirror.
- Touching it throughout the day.
- Asking five different people what they think.
- Following advice from social media instead of sticking to one protocol.
- Trying multiple aftercare products "just to be safe."
- Covering it, uncovering it, wrapping it again or experimenting with different healing methods halfway through.

None of these improve healing.

Most of them interrupt it.

Less Is More

One sentence sums up the entire Dry Healing Method:

Clean it. Dry it. Moisturise it only when necessary. Then leave it alone.

The fewer unnecessary things you do to your tattoo, the better your body can do what it has evolved to do.

SECTION 5 — WHAT'S NORMAL DURING HEALING

One of the biggest sources of anxiety during tattoo healing is not knowing what to expect.

Every day I receive messages from clients asking if something is normal—only to show me a tattoo that is healing exactly as I would expect.

Your tattoo will change almost every day during the healing process.

Some changes happen over hours, others over weeks.

Most are completely normal.

Understanding these changes will help you recognise the difference between healthy healing and a genuine problem.

Redness

Some redness immediately after tattooing is completely normal.

This is simply your body's natural inflammatory response to a controlled injury.

The redness should gradually reduce over the first few days.

Areas that received more work, heavier colour saturation or naturally move more may remain slightly pink for a little longer.

Warmth

A fresh tattoo will often feel warmer than the surrounding skin.

This is expected during the first 24-48h.

Your immune system is increasing blood flow to the area as part of the healing process.

Mild warmth on its own is not a cause for concern.

Swelling

Some tattoos swell more than others.

This depends on:

- Placement.
- Individual skin.
- Time spent tattooing.
- Amount of movement after your appointment.

Swelling is commonly more noticeable on:

- Feet.
- Ankles.
- Hands.
- Elbows.
- Knees.

It should gradually improve over the first few days.

Tightness

As your tattoo begins to dry, your skin will often feel tight.

Many clients describe the sensation as feeling similar to mild sunburn.

This is completely normal.

A feeling of tightness does not automatically mean your tattoo needs moisturiser.

Itching

Almost everybody experiences itching.

This is a normal part of skin regeneration.

Do not scratch your tattoo.

Scratching damages healing skin, disrupts the surface of your tattoo and increases the risk of poor healing.

If the itching becomes irritating:

- Gently tap the skin around the tattoo.
 - Distract yourself and allow the sensation to pass.
-

Peeling

Your tattoo will almost certainly peel.

This usually begins several days into healing.

The peeling skin often looks like tiny pieces of coloured skin coming away from the tattoo.

This is completely normal.

Do not pull it off.

Allow it to separate naturally.

Removing peeling skin before it is ready damages healing tissue and increases the risk of uneven healing.

Flaking

Some tattoos produce very fine flakes instead of larger pieces of peeling skin.

Others do both.

Both are completely normal.

Scabbing

Small, light scabs can occur during perfectly normal healing.

Large, thick or heavily cracked scabs are less common and usually indicate the skin has experienced more trauma or has become excessively dry.

Regardless of size—

Never pick a scab.

Scabs protect healing tissue.

Removing them before they are ready damages the healing surface and can lead to delayed healing, unnecessary scarring and loss of pigment.

Allow every scab to fall away naturally.

A Dull or Milky Appearance

Many people panic because their tattoo suddenly looks faded.

It hasn't faded.

During healing, a thin layer of new skin forms over the tattoo.

This temporarily softens the appearance of the colours and makes the tattoo look cloudy, dull or slightly milky.

Once the skin matures, the tattoo gradually regains its normal appearance.

Dry Skin

Healing skin naturally becomes dry.

This is expected.

Your goal is not to eliminate every trace of dryness.

Your goal is to prevent the skin from becoming excessively dry or uncomfortable.

A tattoo that feels slightly dry is often healing perfectly.

Minor Ink Transfer

During the first few days, you may notice tiny amounts of pigment on:

- Paper towels.
- Clothing.
- Bed sheets.

This is simply excess surface pigment.

It is not your tattoo falling out.

The pigment that forms your healed tattoo sits much deeper within the skin.

Small Pimples

Occasionally small spots or pimples may appear around a healing tattoo.

These are often caused by:

- Blocked pores.
- Hair follicles.
- Excess moisturiser.
- Friction.

Do not squeeze them.

Continue following your aftercare routine.

If they become widespread, increasingly painful or produce pus, equates to something slipping away from you in the aftercare routine - contact me.

Bruising

Some people bruise easily.

Certain placements are also more prone to bruising than others.

Bruising around a fresh tattoo is completely normal and usually resolves naturally over the following days.

Everyone Heals Differently

Some people hardly peel.

Some peel a lot.

Some people itch constantly.

Others barely itch at all.

None of these differences automatically indicate that something is wrong.

The important thing is to look at the overall pattern of healing rather than comparing your tattoo to someone else's.

When Normal Stops Being Normal

A tattoo should gradually improve with each passing day.

If your tattoo is becoming:

- More painful instead of less painful.
- More swollen instead of less swollen.
- More red instead of less red.
- Increasingly hot to the touch after the first few days.
- Producing thick yellow or green discharge.
- Developing an unpleasant smell.

These are not considered normal healing.

The next section explains how to recognise genuine complications and what to do if they occur.

SECTION 6 — WHEN SOMETHING ISN'T NORMAL

The vast majority of tattoos heal without any complications.

However, it is important to recognise the difference between **normal healing** and a situation that requires attention.

One of the easiest ways to judge your tattoo is to ask yourself one simple question:

"Is it gradually improving?"

Healthy tattoos generally become less painful, less swollen and more comfortable as each day passes.

If your tattoo is moving in the opposite direction, it deserves attention.

Contact Me or Seek Medical Advice?

If something doesn't seem right, I would much rather you message me than sit at home worrying.

Clear photographs taken in good natural lighting allow me to assess most healing concerns quickly.

However...

While I have many years of experience working with skin and wound healing, **I am not a doctor.**

If I believe your tattoo requires medical assessment, I will tell you immediately.

Likewise, if you develop symptoms that suggest a significant infection or you feel generally unwell, **do not wait for my reply before seeking medical attention.**

Your health will always come before your tattoo.

Signs of Infection

Some redness, warmth and tenderness are completely normal during the first few days.

An infection is different.

Typical signs include:

- Pain that continues getting worse instead of better.
- Redness that spreads further away from the tattoo.
- Increasing swelling after the first few days.
- Thick yellow, green or foul-smelling discharge.
- Significant heat that continues increasing.
- Fever.
- Chills.
- Feeling generally unwell.

If you experience these symptoms, **seek medical assessment as soon as possible.**

Do not attempt to treat a suspected infection using advice from the internet.

Normal Irritation vs. Allergic Reaction

Fresh tattoos often become slightly red and irritated.

This is expected.

Likewise, some people—particularly those with sensitive skin—may notice mild redness, irritation or even small blisters around the outer edge of the healing film.

This is usually caused by the adhesive, surface tension and normal movement of the skin rather than a true allergy.

These reactions are generally mild and settle once the dressing is removed.

A genuine allergic reaction is uncommon but may include:

- Rapidly spreading redness well beyond the dressing.
- Severe itching that continues worsening.
- Widespread blistering.
- Significant swelling.
- Difficulty breathing or swelling of the lips, tongue or throat.

Difficulty breathing or swelling involving your face or throat is a medical emergency. Seek emergency medical care immediately.

Adhesive Irritation

Medical adhesive does not behave the same way on every person's skin.

Some people develop temporary irritation around the edge of the dressing.

Provided the dressing remains sealed, dry and the irritation is limited to the adhesive area, this is usually not a cause for concern.

If the irritation becomes severe, the dressing should be removed and the tattoo cleaned according to this guide.

Continue healing using the Dry Healing Method.

Excessive Swelling

Some swelling is expected.

However, swelling should gradually improve.

If swelling continues increasing, becomes extremely painful or significantly limits movement, seek advice.

Bleeding

Bleeding during heavy, highly saturated or technically demanding tattoo work is completely normal and is managed throughout your appointment.

You will not leave my studio with an actively bleeding tattoo. Before your tattoo is dressed, active bleeding has stopped. Plasma and lymphatic fluid may continue collecting beneath the film afterwards—this is normal and is not the same as bleeding.

If active bleeding restarts after you have left the studio, this is not part of the normal healing process I expect. It can happen due to medication, alcohol, physical impact, excessive movement or pressure on the tattoo, or an underlying health factor.

Remove the healing film, clean the tattoo thoroughly with clean hands, and apply firm, continuous pressure using clean paper towels.

If the bleeding does not stop or appears significant, seek medical advice.

Plasma is normal. Active bleeding restarting after leaving the studio is not—deal with it immediately.

Excessive Scabbing

Light scabbing can occur during normal healing.

Very thick, hard or deeply cracked scabs are less common.

If this happens:

Do not pick them.

Do not trim them.

Do not attempt to soften them by soaking the tattoo.

Continue following your aftercare instructions and contact me if you are concerned.

My Tattoo Looks Patchy

Do not judge your tattoo while it is healing.

Fresh tattoos often appear:

- Uneven.
- Dull.
- Milky.
- Dry.
- Patchy.

This is completely normal during the healing process.

A tattoo should never be assessed until it has fully healed.

I Think I've Lost Ink

In almost every case...

You haven't.

During healing, it is completely normal to see:

- Excess pigment on paper towels.
- Pigment trapped beneath healing film.
- Coloured flakes during peeling.

None of this means the tattoo itself has disappeared.

Allow the tattoo to complete the healing process before making any judgement about the final result.

If You're Unsure...

Don't guess.

Don't ask strangers on social media.

Don't upload a blurry photograph to an online forum and trust the first comment you receive.

Ask me.

I already know:

- How your tattoo looked when you left the studio.
- How your skin behaved during the appointment.
- How much work was performed.
- Which healing method you're using.

That information allows me to give far more accurate advice than somebody who has never seen your tattoo.

If I think something needs medical attention, I'll tell you.

If I think you're healing perfectly normally, I'll tell you that too.

That's what I'm here for.

SECTION 7 — YOUR HEALING TIMELINE

Tattoo healing is not perfectly predictable.

Your skin, the placement of your tattoo and the amount of work completed during your session will all affect how quickly you move through each stage.

Use this timeline as a guide—not a stopwatch.

The most important thing is that your tattoo should gradually become **less painful, less swollen and more comfortable over time.**

Day 0 — The Day of Your Tattoo

Your tattoo has just undergone significant controlled trauma.

Redness, warmth, swelling and tenderness are completely normal.

For heavy, highly saturated or technically demanding work, bleeding during the tattooing process is also normal and is managed throughout your appointment.

You will not leave my studio with an actively bleeding tattoo.

Once dressed, your tattoo may continue producing plasma and lymphatic fluid. This can mix with excess pigment and collect beneath the healing film.

This is normal.

Pain Management & Swelling

As the local adrenaline from your tattoo session wears off, it is completely normal for the tattoo to become more tender during the first evening.

Unless you have been advised otherwise by a healthcare professional, have an allergy to ibuprofen or any other reason you should not take it, I generally recommend **200 mg of ibuprofen**:

- After leaving the studio.
- Before going to bed.
- The following morning after waking.

Always follow the instructions supplied with your medication and never exceed the recommended dose.

If you know you cannot safely take ibuprofen, **do not take it simply because it is mentioned in this guide.**

If your tattoo is on an arm or leg, keep the tattooed limb elevated whenever you are resting during the first 24 hours. Elevation helps reduce unnecessary swelling and generally makes the first day considerably more comfortable.

Days 1–2

Your tattoo may still feel:

- Warm.
- Tight.
- Tender.
- Slightly swollen.
- Similar to sunburn.

Fluid may continue collecting beneath the healing film.

The film may wrinkle, develop small air pockets or appear cloudy. You may feel as though the tattoo is "sweating."

All of this is normal.

If your tattoo is on an arm or leg and swelling is present, **continue elevating the limb whenever you are sitting or resting.**

For clients who normally use ibuprofen safely and have chosen to use it as described above, the following morning is the final routine point mentioned in this protocol. **Continue to follow the medication's own instructions and do not exceed the stated dose.**

Some clients with sensitive skin may develop mild irritation or slight blistering around the very edge of the film due to surface tension and friction.

Provided the dressing remains completely sealed and dry, leave it alone.

If there is any suspicion that tap water has entered beneath the film, remove it immediately and begin the Dry Healing Method.

Days 3–4

For most clients, the initial warmth, tenderness and swelling should now be improving.

The tattoo may begin to itch as the skin enters the next stage of healing.

By this point, any plasma that collected beneath the healing film during the first 24–48 hours should largely have been reabsorbed by your body.

If, after approximately 48 hours, you still have large pockets of free-moving fluid beneath the dressing, **please contact me before doing anything else.**

Do not puncture the film.

Do not attempt to drain the fluid.

Do not replace or repair the dressing yourself.

If the dressing remains completely sealed and dry, leave it in place unless I advise otherwise.

Days 4–6 — Removing the Film

Most of my clients will remove their healing film between Day 4 and Day 6.

Remember: this extended wear time is based on **my preparation and application protocol** and applies to tattoos completed by me.

Once the film is removed, wash the tattoo using the cleansing product supplied in your aftercare pack.

If you are purchasing your own products, use **Octenisan® Wash Lotion**.

Using clean hands, work the cleanser thoroughly and methodically across the entire tattoo.

Gently does not mean timidly.

Allow the cleanser to remain on the tattoo for approximately **60 seconds**, then rinse it completely using clean, lukewarm water.

Pat the tattoo dry using clean paper towels only.

Allow the skin to air dry for as long as necessary until you begin to feel the slight dry tension described earlier in this guide.

Then begin the Dry Healing Method.

Days 6–14

If your healing film remained completely sealed and dry for the full recommended wear time, you have already completed the most demanding stage of healing under the dressing.

From this point onwards, your job is simply to support your skin while it completes the final stages of recovery.

Continue following the **Dry Healing Method** exactly as described.

Morning and evening:

1. Wash the tattoo using **Octenisan® Wash Lotion** or the cleanser supplied in your aftercare pack.
2. Using **clean hands only**, thoroughly and methodically clean the entire tattoo. **Gently does not mean timidly**. Clean every part of the tattoo without scrubbing the skin.
3. Leave the cleanser on the tattoo for approximately **60 seconds**.
4. Rinse thoroughly using clean, lukewarm water until **all** cleanser has been removed.
5. Pat the tattoo dry using **clean paper towels only**. **Never rub the tattoo**.
6. Allow the tattoo to air dry naturally until you begin to feel the slight dry tension described earlier in this guide.
7. If your skin genuinely feels dry or uncomfortable, apply **a very thin layer** of moisturiser and massage it into the skin for approximately **20 seconds**.
8. If you can still **see** moisturiser sitting on the surface of the tattoo after massaging it in, **gently dab the excess away using a clean paper towel**. Your tattoo should never have a visible layer of product sitting on the surface.

If your healing film completed its job successfully, you should not expect the heavy peeling, thick scabbing or severe itching commonly associated with traditional open healing.

Your tattoo should become more comfortable each day.

Continue trusting the process and resist the temptation to overcare for your tattoo.

Weeks 2–4

By this stage, your tattoo should continue feeling more like normal skin every day.

Continue washing it as part of your normal daily hygiene routine.

If moisturiser is needed, continue applying it exactly as described above:

- Apply only a very thin layer.
- Massage it into the skin for approximately 20 seconds.
- If any product remains visible on the surface, **dab away the excess using a clean paper towel.**

Your tattoo should never appear wet, greasy or coated in moisturiser.

The goal is to support your skin—not smother it.

Although the tattoo may already appear healed, your skin is still continuing its final stages of recovery beneath the surface.

Avoid unnecessary trauma, scratching, excessive friction and prolonged UV exposure.

By the end of this stage, your tattoo should have settled enough for its healed appearance to be properly assessed.

SECTION 8 — ACTIVITIES & THINGS TO AVOID

Your tattoo may look considerably better long before it has finished healing.

One of the most common mistakes people make is assuming that because the surface looks healed, the tattoo is ready to return to normal life.

It isn't.

Although the outer layer of skin may recover within a few weeks, the deeper layers continue repairing themselves for considerably longer.

For that reason, **I recommend allowing a minimum of 6–8 weeks before exposing your tattoo to prolonged soaking or environments that significantly increase the risk of contamination.**

When in doubt, give your skin more time—not less.

Showering

While Wearing the Healing Film

Keep the healing film **completely dry**.

If possible, choose a bath where the tattoo remains completely out of the water.

If you need to shower, make every effort to ensure **no tap water comes into contact with the dressing**.

If you suspect water has entered beneath the healing film at any point, remove the dressing immediately and begin the Dry Healing Method.

After Removing the Healing Film

Normal showers are perfectly fine.

Wash the tattoo using the method described earlier in this guide.

Do not scrub the tattoo.

Do not use exfoliating products.

Do not allow shampoo, conditioner or heavily fragranced body washes to sit on the tattoo longer than necessary.

Baths

Avoid soaking your tattoo in a bath until it has fully healed.

A healing tattoo should never remain submerged in water for prolonged periods.

Swimming Pools

Do not use swimming pools for a minimum of 6–8 weeks.

Swimming pools are not sterile.

They contain chlorine, bacteria and other contaminants that have no place in a healing tattoo.

Even if your tattoo appears healed on the surface, the deeper layers of skin are still recovering.

Hot Tubs & Jacuzzis

Avoid hot tubs and jacuzzis for a minimum of **6–8 weeks**.

Warm water softens healing skin and significantly increases the risk of contamination.

The Sea

Do not swim in the sea for a minimum of **6–8 weeks**.

Salt water is **not** a disinfectant for a fresh tattoo.

Natural seawater contains bacteria, microorganisms and environmental contaminants that can interfere with healing.

Rivers & Lakes

Exactly the same advice applies.

Avoid rivers, lakes and any other natural bodies of water for **at least 6–8 weeks**.

Natural water is never sterile.

Sauna & Steam Rooms

Avoid saunas and steam rooms for a minimum of **6–8 weeks**.

Excessive heat increases blood flow, promotes heavy sweating and places unnecessary stress on healing skin.

Your tattoo will benefit far more from a few weeks of patience than from returning to the sauna early.

Exercise

Normal day-to-day movement is encouraged.

Your body heals better when you continue living normally.

However, avoid activities that repeatedly stretch, rub or traumatise the tattoo during the early stages of healing.

If an activity repeatedly irritates the tattoo, stop and allow your skin more time to recover.

The Gym

You may gradually return to the gym once your healing film has been removed and your tattoo feels comfortable.

Pay attention to the tattoo—not your training programme.

If clothing, equipment or repeated movement causes friction over the tattoo, modify your training until the skin has recovered.

Always shower afterwards and follow your normal cleaning routine.

Contact Sports

Avoid contact sports until your tattoo has fully healed.

Repeated impact, friction and direct contact dramatically increase the risk of damaging healing skin.

Sun Exposure

Avoid direct sun exposure while your tattoo is healing.

Fresh tattoos and UV radiation are a poor combination.

Once your tattoo has completely healed, make **SPF 50** part of your routine whenever the tattoo will be exposed to sunlight.

Nothing ages a tattoo faster than repeated UV exposure.

Shaving

Do not shave over the tattoo until the skin has completely recovered.

If there is any remaining dryness, peeling, irritation or tenderness, it is too early.

Clothing

Wear clean, loose-fitting clothing whenever possible.

Avoid tight clothing that repeatedly rubs across the tattoo.

If clothing sticks to the tattoo, **never pull it away dry**.

Wet the fabric first, then gently separate it from the skin.

Sleeping

Use clean bedding.

If possible, avoid sleeping directly on a fresh tattoo during the first few nights.

If this cannot be avoided, don't panic—simply avoid unnecessary pressure where practical and continue following your aftercare routine.

Pets

As much as they love you, your pets do not need to inspect your new tattoo.

Do not allow dogs, cats or other animals to lick or repeatedly touch the tattoo.

Animal saliva contains bacteria that do not belong anywhere near a healing wound.

Work

Most people can return to work immediately.

However, if your job regularly exposes your tattoo to:

- Dust.
- Dirt.
- Chemicals.
- Animal contact.
- Excessive sweating.
- Repeated friction.

Take additional care to keep the tattoo clean and protected.

If you are unsure whether your working environment may affect healing, ask me before returning.

The General Rule

If an activity exposes your tattoo to:

- Contamination.
- Prolonged soaking.
- Excessive heat.
- Heavy friction.
- Repeated trauma.

It can wait.

You have invested in artwork that should last a lifetime.

Giving your skin an extra few weeks to heal properly is a very small price to pay for decades of enjoying the result.

SECTION 9 — LONG-TERM TATTOO CARE

Congratulations.

If you've reached this stage, the hard work is over.

Your tattoo has healed successfully, but looking after it doesn't stop here.

A well-executed tattoo can remain beautiful for decades, but no tattoo is immune to time. How your tattoo ages from this point onwards depends largely on how well you look after your skin.

Your Tattoo Is Now Part of Your Skin

Once fully healed, your tattoo should be treated like the rest of your skin.

Healthy skin supports healthy-looking tattoos.

Simple habits such as staying hydrated, maintaining a healthy skincare routine and avoiding unnecessary skin damage will help preserve the clarity of your tattoo for years to come.

Sunlight Is Your Tattoo's Biggest Enemy

Nothing ages a tattoo faster than repeated exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

UV light gradually breaks down pigment within the skin and accelerates the natural ageing process.

Whenever your tattoo will be exposed to direct sunlight, apply a high-quality **SPF 50 sunscreen** and reapply it according to the manufacturer's instructions.

If possible, limit prolonged exposure during the strongest hours of the day.

Your tattoo will thank you in ten years' time.

Moisturise Your Skin—Not Just Your Tattoo

Once your tattoo has fully healed, moisturising becomes part of general skin care rather than tattoo aftercare.

Well-hydrated skin tends to look healthier, smoother and allows tattoos to maintain better contrast and definition.

You don't need expensive products.

Consistency matters far more than branding.

Weight Changes & Ageing

Your tattoo will naturally age with your body.

Weight changes, muscle growth, pregnancy and the normal ageing process can all alter the appearance of a tattoo over time.

This is completely normal and should be expected.

The goal of a well-designed tattoo is not to remain frozen in time, but to continue looking good as your body changes.

Touch-Ups

Not every tattoo will require a touch-up, not everything you think should be a touch up is one.

Every artist has their own standards, techniques, pricing structure and aftercare expectations. For that reason, the way one artist approaches touch-ups may be completely different from another.

The information in this guide is intended to help you understand the normal healing process and recognise when something may require further assessment.

It is not a guarantee or entitlement to a free touch-up or any other form of complimentary treatment.

If your tattoo was completed by me and, once it has fully healed, you have concerns about the final result, simply get in touch and I'll be happy to assess it.

If your tattoo was completed by another artist, always discuss touch-ups directly with them and follow their policies.

This guide does not override any individual artist's terms, policies or professional judgement, and it should never be used to request treatment or services that an artist has not agreed to provide.

Most importantly, **never judge a tattoo before it has fully healed.** A tattoo should only be assessed once the healing process has been completed.

Look After Your Skin

The best thing you can do for your tattoo is surprisingly simple:

Look after yourself.

Sleep well.

Stay hydrated.

Eat well.

Protect your skin from unnecessary sun damage.

Healthy skin will always display a tattoo better than neglected skin.

Your tattoo is designed to last a lifetime.

Treat your skin accordingly.

SECTION 10 — A Final Word

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide.

Whether you are one of my clients or simply someone who came across this handbook looking for reliable tattoo aftercare information, I genuinely hope it has helped you better understand the healing process and given you the confidence to look after your tattoo properly.

Everything in this guide has been written from my own professional experience, observations and the healing protocol I use in my practice. It reflects what has consistently produced the best results for the tattoos I create.

At the same time, tattooing is a profession with many highly skilled artists, each with their own techniques, products and healing methods. Different approaches do not automatically mean someone is right or wrong.

If your tattoo was completed by another artist, always respect their professional judgement and studio policies. They understand their own work, their own techniques and the results they expect from their healing process better than anyone else.

This guide is intended to educate—not to replace the relationship between you and your tattoo artist, and not to overrule their professional advice.

If your artist asks you to follow a specific aftercare routine, commit to that routine from beginning to end. Mixing advice from multiple artists, social media and online forums rarely improves healing and often creates unnecessary confusion.

If you ever find yourself in a situation where you genuinely cannot get the guidance or support you need, don't feel that you have to manage everything alone.

If you are willing to explain the situation clearly and provide the relevant information, I'll always do my best to offer honest, professional advice—even if I wasn't the artist who created your tattoo. Sometimes all someone needs is a second opinion to better understand what's happening.

Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask questions.

A good tattoo artist would always rather answer a genuine question than help solve a preventable problem later.

Thank you again for reading.

Take care of your skin, trust the healing process, and enjoy your tattoo for many years to come.

Stay in Touch

Whether you're one of my clients or you've simply found this guide helpful, you're always welcome to get in touch.

If you have a genuine question about tattoo healing, aftercare or one of my articles, I'll always do my best to point you in the right direction.

If, after reading this guide, you feel that my approach to tattooing and aftercare aligns with what you're looking for, I'd be honoured to work with you in the future.

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Thank you once again for reading this guide.

Look after your skin, trust the healing process, and enjoy your tattoo for many years to come.

Dauids Strods

Founder, Ecdysis & Davestrod.com