

Tennessee Tattoo Law

"We are all tattooed in our cradles with the beliefs of our tribe; the record may seem superficial, but it is indelible."

-- U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935)

"Good tattoos aren't cheap and cheap tattoos aren't good."

-- Author Unknown

Each state in the U.S. has laws about tattoo safety. Persons who are "thinking about inking" should know about Tennessee tattoo laws.

Q. Who can get a tattoo in Tennessee?

The better question is: Who cannot get a tattoo?

It is illegal for minors in Tennessee (persons under 18) to get a permanent tattoo, where a needle injects colored ink into the skin.

Any person "who for commercial purposes tattoos the skin of any person under 18 years of age" is guilty of a Class A misdemeanor and can go to jail for up to 11 months and 29 days, or pay a \$2,500 fine, or both.

Q. Who can give a tattoo in Tennessee?

A tattoo artist must be licensed by the state department of health. There are several requirements to get a license.

To become a tattoo artist, persons must complete a training program in methods of sterilization and use of tattooing instruments and materials.

They must also take and pass a written examination given by the local health department.

Finally, they must complete a one-year apprenticeship in a certified tattoo operator's shop, supervised by a licensed tattoo artist with at least three years of tattoo experience in Tennessee.

Q. What is a "tattoo operator"?

Persons who control, operate, or manage a tattoo shop or studio are tattoo operators under Tennessee law, and must register with the state department of health.

A person who operates a tattoo studio without a state permit, or who operates a studio after the license has

been revoked, is guilty of a Class C misdemeanor and can be fined \$500 for each violation.

Q. Are there safety rules for tattoo shops?

Yes. For example, health departments must inspect each tattoo shop at least four times a year. A tattoo shop can be fined \$100 and shut down for not following strict sterilization methods, or handling reusable instruments improperly, or not having suitable handwashing and restroom facilities. This helps guard against serious diseases such as hepatitis.

The studio must be inspected again within 7 days. A second such violation within one year can mean a \$500 fine and the tattoo studio's license can be permanently revoked.

Q. What does a tattoo cost?

You can get a small tattoo for less than \$100, but sometimes the real long-term cost may be thousands of dollars.

Here's why. About half of all persons who get tattoos later change their minds. Tattoo removal should be done by a doctor or clinic, and not a tattoo shop. Laser removal is generally the best way, but may require several sessions at \$350 to \$600 each, depending on the tattoo size and color.

Lasers do not work on some inks. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration cautions that many colors used in tattoo inks are not approved for skin use. "Some of these colors are meant for printing or for painting cars," the FDA warns. In some cases, tattoo removal requires costly and painful skin abrasion or skin grafting. "Th/ink" carefully!

by Jim Hawkins, Managing Attorney,
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