

Clubbers rave about UV tattoos

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NEW YORK — Dominique McDaniel's right arm looks normal enough: tan and lined with light-blue veins. But when she moves a black light over her forearm, three glowing stars emerge.

McDaniel stumbled into a culture she found fascinating one afternoon when she was sitting in her mother's one-story ranch home outside New Orleans: the world of UV tattoos -- body art done in a reactive ink that appears invisible under normal light and emerges under black lighting.

"I saw UV tattoos one day on television, on 'Ripley's Believe it or Not,' and thought, 'Wow, that's really cool,'" said McDaniel, a student at Louisiana State University who got her first tattoo when she was 18. "I started hanging out at a local tattoo studio that made their own UV ink and became friends with the owners."

Within months McDaniel was sporting a band of three stars on her right forearm done entirely in white UV ink, and a tattoo on her wrist that has UV ink accents, allowing the design to morph under black light.

The popularity of UV tattoos -- also known as black-light tattoos -- has skyrocketed in recent years.

Long found on the rave scene, the tattoos have reached teenagers, body art enthusiasts and people looking for a way to sport tattoos in a discreet way.

However, safety concerns about UV tattoos abound. The chemical makeup of the different inks used has been questioned, individuals have reported skin rashes and infections, and some scientists suspect the inks might be carcinogenic. Because of these concerns, some tattoo artists will not work with UV inks.

Others have no qualms about inking black-light work. With no regulation over what ink is safe, and with studios often concocting their own blends, it can be hard to tell exactly what pulses through tattoo guns.

In the past, serious skin problems have resulted from the use of inks containing phosphorous -- a substance that can often cause the body to reject the ink. Horror stories about UV tattoos turning brown after a few months or recipients developing serious skin rashes have circulated for years.

Many of those fears are valid, according to Dr. Joshua Fox, a dermatologist in New York who has treated people with skin rashes resulting from UV tattoos and who is researching new techniques for tattoo removal.

"Statistically, there have been more reactions with UV tattoos than with normal tattoos," Fox said. "Sometimes the inks don't mix as well, and your body reacts against the foreign agents."

Fox added that despite the chemical advances with UV tattoos -- mainly the elimination of phosphorous in some inks -- there will be no way to tell how safe they are until the federal government starts regulating tattoos.

Some tattoo parlors advertise that they use UV ink approved by the Food and Drug Administration. A dangerous caveat often goes unnoted, however. According to the FDA, the most widely used UV inks are approved for use only as tracking liquids to be injected into fish, not as tattoo ink for human body art.

Marisa DiMattia, a lawyer and writer in New York who has traveled the world in search of fine tattoo art, advises people to note the ambiguity that exists around government approval and UV ink.

"Companies claim to have FDA approval, but when you read the fine print it says nothing for human use," she said. DiMattia said some inks were even suspected of containing carcinogens or allergens that can cause severe itching and rashes. No long-term studies on the side effects of UV inks have been done, she said.