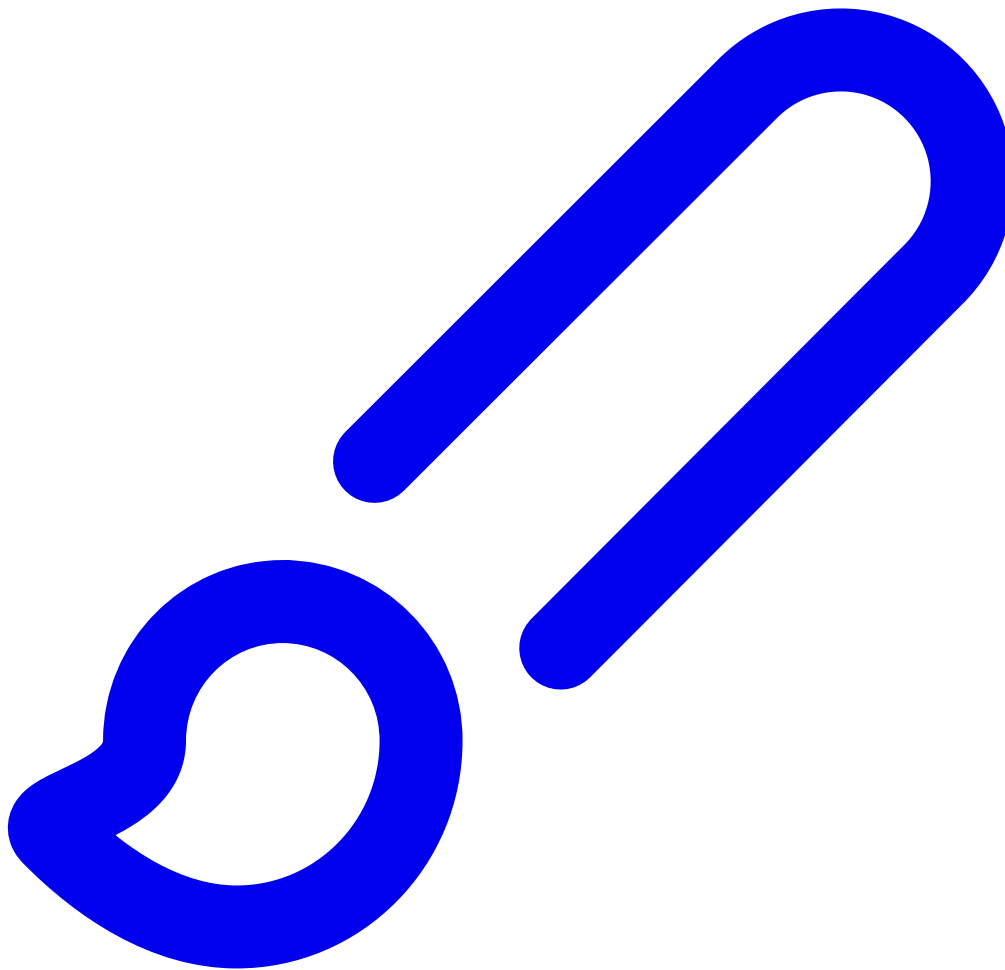




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Your First Tattoo: What to Expect Before, During and After

By the [Double Down Tattoo Editorial Team](#) · Reviewed against our [editorial standards](#) · 8 min read · Last reviewed 2026

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Your First Tattoo: What to Expect Before, During and After

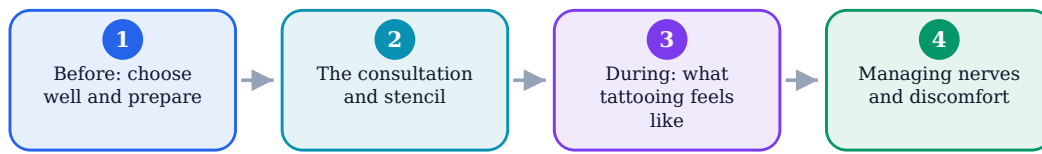


Figure: Your First Tattoo: What to Expect Before, During and After

Getting your first tattoo is exciting and, for most people, a little nerve-wracking. Fear of the unknown — how much it hurts, what actually happens, whether you'll regret it — is completely normal. The good news is that knowing what to expect removes most of the anxiety and lets you enjoy the experience.

This guide is a calm, practical walkthrough of getting your first tattoo — what happens before, during and after — so you can go in prepared and confident.

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Before: choose well and prepare

The experience starts before the needle. **Choose a reputable artist and studio** and a design you're confident about. In the day or two before, look after yourself: get a **good night's sleep**, **eat a proper meal** beforehand so your blood sugar is steady, **stay hydrated**, and avoid anything that thins your blood or impairs you (like alcohol) beforehand. Wear comfortable clothing that gives easy access to the area being tattooed.

The consultation and stencil

A session usually begins with a brief **consultation** to confirm the design, size and exact placement. Your artist will typically apply a **stencil** — a temporary outline — so you can see how it sits on your body before any permanent work begins. This is your chance to speak up: check the position in a mirror and make sure you're happy. Take this moment

seriously, since it's placed once.

During: what tattooing feels like

Once you're both happy, the **tattooing** begins. Most people describe the sensation as a scratching or stinging feeling rather than sharp pain, and it's usually **manageable** — often less intense than first-timers fear. It varies by **placement** (bonier, more sensitive areas tend to feel more) and by the design's size and detail. You can talk to your artist, take short breaks if needed, and breathe steadily to stay relaxed.

Managing nerves and discomfort

Nervousness is normal. **Communicate** with your artist — a good one will help put you at ease and will pause if you need it. Focusing on your breathing, staying still, and remembering that the sensation is temporary all help. Many people find the reality far more bearable than the anticipation, and the excitement of watching the tattoo come to life takes over.

After: the aftercare period

When it's done, your artist will **cover the tattoo** and give you **aftercare instructions** — follow them closely. A new tattoo is essentially a wound and heals over several weeks, with some normal scabbing, flaking and itching along the way. Keep it clean, moisturised as advised, and protected, and resist picking at it. Good aftercare is what keeps your first tattoo looking its best.

Setting realistic expectations

Finally, go in with **realistic expectations**. A fresh tattoo looks slightly different once fully healed, the process takes patience, and it's normal to feel a mix of excitement and nerves. Trust your preparation and your artist, enjoy the experience, and remember that a well-chosen first tattoo, cared for properly, is something you can be proud of for years. If anything seems wrong during healing, seek medical advice.

How to prepare the day before and day of

A little preparation makes a first tattoo far more comfortable. In the day before and the hours leading up:

- Get a good night's sleep and eat a proper meal beforehand — don't arrive hungry.
- Stay hydrated and avoid alcohol, which can affect bleeding and healing.
- Wear comfortable clothing that gives easy access to the area.
- Bring water, a snack, and something to occupy longer sessions.

What the sensation is actually like

The most common first-timer question is simply 'how much does it hurt?', and while it's genuinely individual, some general expectations help. Most people describe the feeling as an uncomfortable scratching or stinging rather than sharp, unbearable pain, and it's very manageable for the majority who go through with it. Intensity varies with

placement — areas over bone or with thinner skin tend to feel more than fleshier areas — and with the length of the session, since fatigue makes later stages harder than the start. Many people find the anticipation worse than the reality and settle in once the first few minutes pass. Nerves are completely normal, and there are practical ways to manage them: breathing steadily rather than tensing, distracting yourself with music or conversation, and remembering you can ask for a short break if you need one. Choosing a smaller, simpler first piece in a less sensitive spot can make the introduction gentler. Being well-rested, fed and hydrated genuinely helps, as discomfort is harder to tolerate when you're depleted. Understanding all this in advance tends to reduce anxiety considerably, and most first-timers come away realising the experience was far more bearable than they feared, which is part of why so many go on to get more.

Setting realistic expectations for the result

Going in with realistic expectations makes the whole experience more satisfying. A fresh tattoo won't look exactly as it will once healed — it can appear brighter, slightly raised or a little different at first, and it will settle over the healing period. The aftercare stage is part of the process rather than an afterthought, and following it carefully protects the final result. It's also worth remembering that a tattoo is permanent and will change subtly over years as skin ages, which is precisely why choosing the design, artist and placement thoughtfully matters so much. Understanding these realities up front means you're delighted rather than surprised by the outcome, and it sets you up to care for the tattoo well so it looks its best for the long term.

Your first tattoo: what to expect by stage

Stage	What happens	What to do
Before	Consultation, design, placement	Eat well, hydrate, sleep; avoid alcohol
During	Stencil, outline, shading	Breathe, take breaks, communicate with your artist
First 24-48 hrs	Redness, mild swelling, plasma	Follow aftercare; keep it clean and covered as advised
Weeks 1-2	Peeling and itching	Do not pick or scratch; moisturise lightly
Weeks 3-4+	Skin settles, colour matures	Keep out of strong sun; use SPF once healed

General guidance only; always follow the specific aftercare advice from your own artist.

Printable checklist

Print this page or save the PDF to keep these steps handy.

- ☐ Before: choose well and prepare
- ☐ The consultation and stencil
- ☐ During: what tattooing feels like
- ☐ Managing nerves and discomfort

- ☐ After: the aftercare period
- ☐ Setting realistic expectations
- ☐ How to prepare the day before and day of
- ☐ What the sensation is actually like

Summary

Getting your first tattoo involves preparing beforehand (choosing a good artist and design, resting, eating and staying hydrated), a session that starts with a consultation and stencil placement before the tattooing itself, and an aftercare period of several weeks. The pain is usually manageable and varies by placement. Come prepared, communicate with your artist, and follow aftercare instructions. This is general information, not medical advice.

Key Takeaways

- Knowing what to expect removes most first-tattoo anxiety.
- Prepare beforehand: eat, hydrate, rest and choose well.
- The session starts with a stencil and placement check before tattooing.
- Pain is usually manageable and varies by placement.
- Follow aftercare instructions for the best healing.

Frequently Asked Questions

How much does a first tattoo hurt?

Most people find it manageable — more of a scratching or stinging sensation than sharp pain — though it varies by placement and the individual. It's often less intense than first-timers expect.

Should I eat before getting a tattoo?

Yes. Eating a proper meal beforehand and staying hydrated helps you feel steadier during the session, especially for longer sittings.

How should I prepare the day before?

Get good sleep, stay hydrated, avoid alcohol and blood-thinning substances beforehand, and wear comfortable clothing with easy access to the area. Arrive rested and calm.

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