Curious About Lupus Tattoos?

by AVA MEENA

Lupus Tattoo: Meaningfulness and Safety

Tattoos can be an incredibly meaningful way to honor your journey with lupus. They're a creative way to express yourself and also a great avenue for spreading lupus awareness.

I have four tattoos of my own and I enjoy learning about people through their body art. So what are some common themes in lupus tattoos and how can we get them safely?

Common Lupus Tattoos and Their Meaning

Lupus tattoos have become very popular. There are over 900 images tagged with #lupustattoo on Instagram. Many feature symbols of lupus, such as a wolf, butterfly, spoons, ribbons or the color purple. The purple butterfly tattoo is especially popular.

There are interesting blends of symbols as well. For example, I've seen a wolf with butterfly wings, a ribbon that ends in a spoon and a butterfly carrying a ribbon.

Symbolism

The wolf became one of the first symbols of lupus when a physician used the Latin word "lupus", which means wolf, to describe facial lesions that resembled a wolf bite. People also compare the fierce nature of the wolf to their immune system when it's mercilessly damaging their body.

Weeks before her death from lupus, Flannery O'Connor famously wrote: "the wolf, I'm afraid, is inside tearing up the place".

The butterfly symbol stems from the iconic butterfly-shaped rash (or malar rash) that appears on the face of many with lupus. Often people are drawn to the butterfly as it's a beautiful, fragile, majestic creature who lives a transformative life.

Spoons and ribbons are common symbols for all chronic illnesses. Spoons come from *The Spoon Theory*, an essay by Christine Miserandino, who has lupus. This theory uses spoons as a visual measurement of how much physical or mental energy someone has each day.

Lupus is also represented by a purple ribbon and the color purple in general. Numerous lupus tattoos feature purple in some way.

Benefits of a Lupus Tattoo

A tattoo can bring significance to its owner, marking important moments in their journey with lupus. If visible and

shared with others, it can be a source of inspiration and positivity for other people with lupus, as well as educational for those who may not know about the illness.

Lupus tattoos are shared widely on the internet and social media. For example, Kristiana Page uses her tattoo to talk about what lupus means to her and to challenge the misconceptions that young, healthy-looking people aren't affected by a chronic illness.

Many women with these tattoos provide emotional support to those with lupus by sharing their stories. Their openness, honesty and encouragement strengthen the lupus community. Sharing positive messages helps those with lupus to maintain an overall optimistic outlook, which increases our physical and mental well-being.

Is It Safe to Get a Tattoo With Lupus?

There are many factors to consider before getting a tattoo with lupus. The good news, however, is that tattoos appear to be safe in people with low or inactive disease activity levels.

Since a tattoo causes physical injury to your skin, you should consider how your skin generally reacts to injuries. The active tattoo process can be very painful depending on the size and location of your tattoo, so also consider how pain affects your lupus flare levels.

As long as there is no active disease or flare, someone with lupus has similar risks as the general population when getting a tattoo. Common risks include:

- skin infection
- skin inflammation (granulomas or keloids)
- allergic reactions
- slow healing
- MRI complications

The risk for infection in any procedure is higher for people with lupus. The risk for an allergic reaction to the ink is also higher due to mercury content; this risk increases with red, green and yellow ink. Much rarer risks include transmission of the hepatitis C virus, which can be eliminated by using a sterile tattooing process, and the Koebner phenomenon.

The Koebner phenomenon is a change in the skin after trauma, and it was observed in a woman with systemic and discoid lupus who developed skin lesions on her tattoo. While this phenomenon is rare, it is a good idea to discuss all risk factors with your doctor prior to getting a tattoo, especially if you're concerned that trauma will lead to the onset of discoid lesions.

Minimizing Risk

You need the safest environment possible when getting tattooed. Some things to look for include state licensing (where applicable), sterile gloves on the artist and sealed tattoo needles that are opened in front of you. Read through a more thorough list of tattoo safety tips from Consumer Reports.

Sara (@thelupustrainer), who has spent 100 hours in the tattoo chair since her lupus diagnosis, recommends only getting black or grey ink, if possible, as well as sticking to one color in a tattoo for ease of healing. She also recommends keeping sessions to four hours or less.

Tattoo aftercare is extremely important; you can mitigate your infection risk by following strict sanitary procedures as your tattoo heals. This includes washing and moisturizing it regularly.

Healthline has a thorough day by day guide for tattoo aftercare.

Tattoo Downsides and Alternatives

Before getting a tattoo, be sure to consider possible obstacles:

- People may react negatively to your tattoo
- Visible tattoos can hurt your chances of getting some jobs
- It could cause a flare, lesions or other lupus complications
- The tattoo could stretch, fade or need upkeep over the years
- You may change your mind and want it removed

My strategy is to wait one year after I've finalized my tattoo design. If I still want it after one year, then it's safe to say I'll be happy with it for years to come — and so far, I've been right.

If you are unable to get a tattoo, you can still enjoy temporary tattoos, henna or other visible symbols such as lupus jewelry or clothing.

Arriving at a Tattoo Verdict

If your lupus is well-controlled, your doctor is on board and a tattoo is important to you, then go for it. Start small, simple and carefully on your tattoo journey, and take heed, because tattoos can be addicting! Fortunately, many people with lupus have successfully gotten a tattoo and cherish their lifelong memento of what lupus means to them.