



“Temporary” henna tattoos – often more permanent than planned!

Australia’s leading professional organisation for the diagnosis and treatment of all skin diseases, the Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD), is warning Australians holiday-makers of the dangers of some overseas “temporary henna tattoos”.

The Honorary Secretary of the ACD, Dr Stephen Shumack, says that while the popularity of temporary henna tattoos continues to grow among tourists, so too does the number of “severe allergic contact dermatitis” reactions being reported as a result of these tattoos.

Allergic reactions to a compound found in some temporary henna tattoos can cause life-long side effects.

For some, the tattoos leave a permanent allergy to the compound ‘para-phenylenediamine’ (PPD), leaving sufferers facing a lifetime of skin problems and scarring, as well as restrictions in their lifestyle choices, including career options, hair dyeing and clothing selection.

“Although the tattoos appear to be marketed as “henna”, many actually contain synthetic colouring agents with a dangerously high percentage of the chemical PPD,” says Dr Shumack.

“PPD is found in the commercial black henna used by many Asian artisans. The allergies are caused by the PPD component of the mixture and not the pure henna.

“Those affected can suffer permanent skin changes, including discoloration and scarring, as well as cross-reaction to related compounds.”

Dr Susi Freeman, of the Australasian College of Dermatologists, has worked closely with sufferers.

“While reports of allergic reactions to pure henna are rare, the addition of PPD (a known allergen) to the traditional mixture of henna is being used increasingly to hasten the dye process, enhance darkness and improve pattern definition,” says Dr Freeman.

“The practice is common among street vendors in holiday resorts in Asia and the Middle East, and increasingly, with tattoo artists in the Western world including Australia.”

Most individuals who are allergic to PPD may also be sensitive to other chemicals and drugs, which have a similar structure such as organic dyes used in clothing.

The explosion in popularity of temporary henna tattoos could prove to have harmful long-term effects, the most common being permanently raised skin in the tattoo area accompanied by pigmentary change – i.e. a permanent ‘not planned for’ tattoo.

People allergic to PPD often develop a permanent sensitization to it and related compounds and therefore have to live with the disadvantage of never being able to use hair dyes, creams and clothing dyes without an allergic reaction.

“The name ‘temporary henna tattoo’ is misleading and gives a false sense of security about the safety of this procedure,” says Dr Shumack.

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Image 1: Contact dermatitis – Common reaction to paraphenyldiamine (PDD).
Raised skin in the tattoo area accompanied by pigmentary change.



Image 2: Contact dermatitis - Bullous patch test reaction to paraphenyldiamine (PPD)

