

MSA warns against temporary 'black henna' tattoos

Now that summer is fast approaching, temperatures rise and clothes diminish in size, people tend to apply henna tattoos as a memento for a holiday or other occasion, or just for the fun of it. Those using pure henna seldom cause any problems and tend to disappear by themselves within a few weeks. However, para-phenylenediamine is sometimes added to the henna for a faster and darker effect, forming so-called 'black henna'. This substance can cause serious allergic reactions with lasting damage. The Market Surveillance Directorate within the Malta Standards Authority advises that black henna tattoos be avoided.

Souvenirs

Temporary henna tattoos are a popular souvenir. In the Middle East, India and North Africa, natural henna has been used for centuries. In fact, these are not real tattoos, as they are painted onto rather than injected under the skin, and they are often applied by travelling artists on beaches, at fairs and festivals. This form of temporary tattoo is particularly popular with young people and is often offered to tourists.

What is black henna?

After painting with pure henna, an orange or chestnut-coloured pattern appears after a few hours. Para-phenylenediamine (PPD) is sometimes added to the henna for a faster and darker effect, forming so-called 'black henna'. Use of this substance is permitted only under strict conditions as a hair dye but not for painting on the skin.

Effects of black henna

After a few days, allergic reactions can arise: itching, redness, spots, blisters or even permanent discolouring of the skin and scarring. People can also become permanently sensitive to this substance, which is also used in dyes for textiles, rubber, sun filters and some medicines.

Recognising black henna

Natural henna paste has a greeny-brown or very dark brownish-green colour. Usually, the painters cannot or do not want to give any good information about where their henna comes from, so ask them for a list of ingredients/instructions. If it is stated that the paste, once applied, can be removed after just one hour, it is definitely black henna, as normal henna has to stay in contact with the skin for as long as possible.

The Malta Standards Authority advises against black henna tattoos.