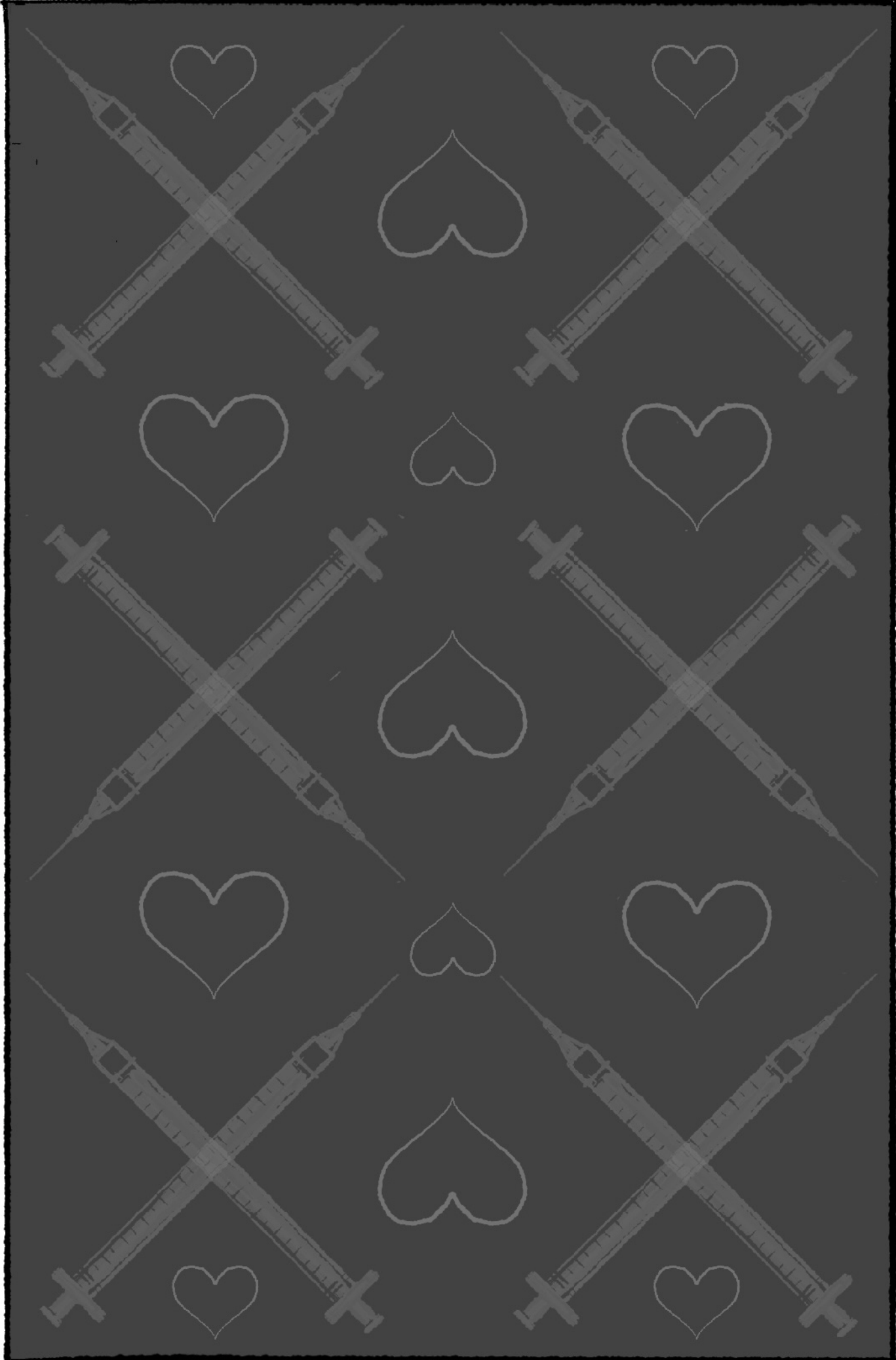


SKIN CARE GUIDE for PEOPLE WHO USE INJECTION DRUGS

Kate Lacour for NEXT Distro

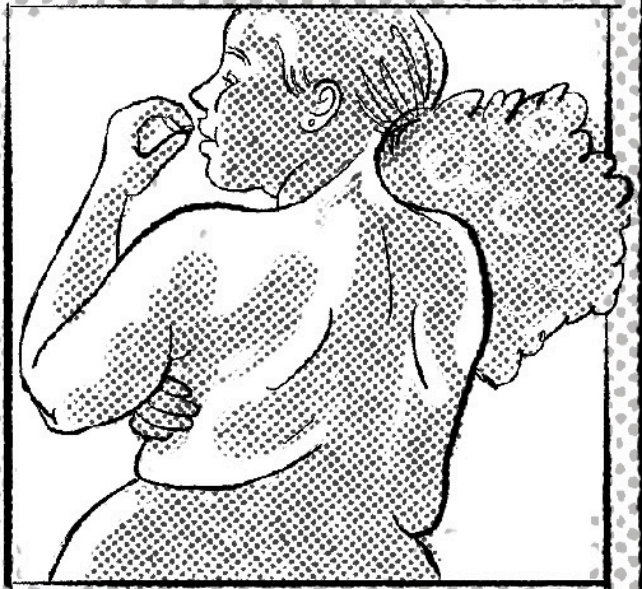




You deserve the best care possible, and so does your skin!

Your skin is

BEAUTIFUL



Your skin is

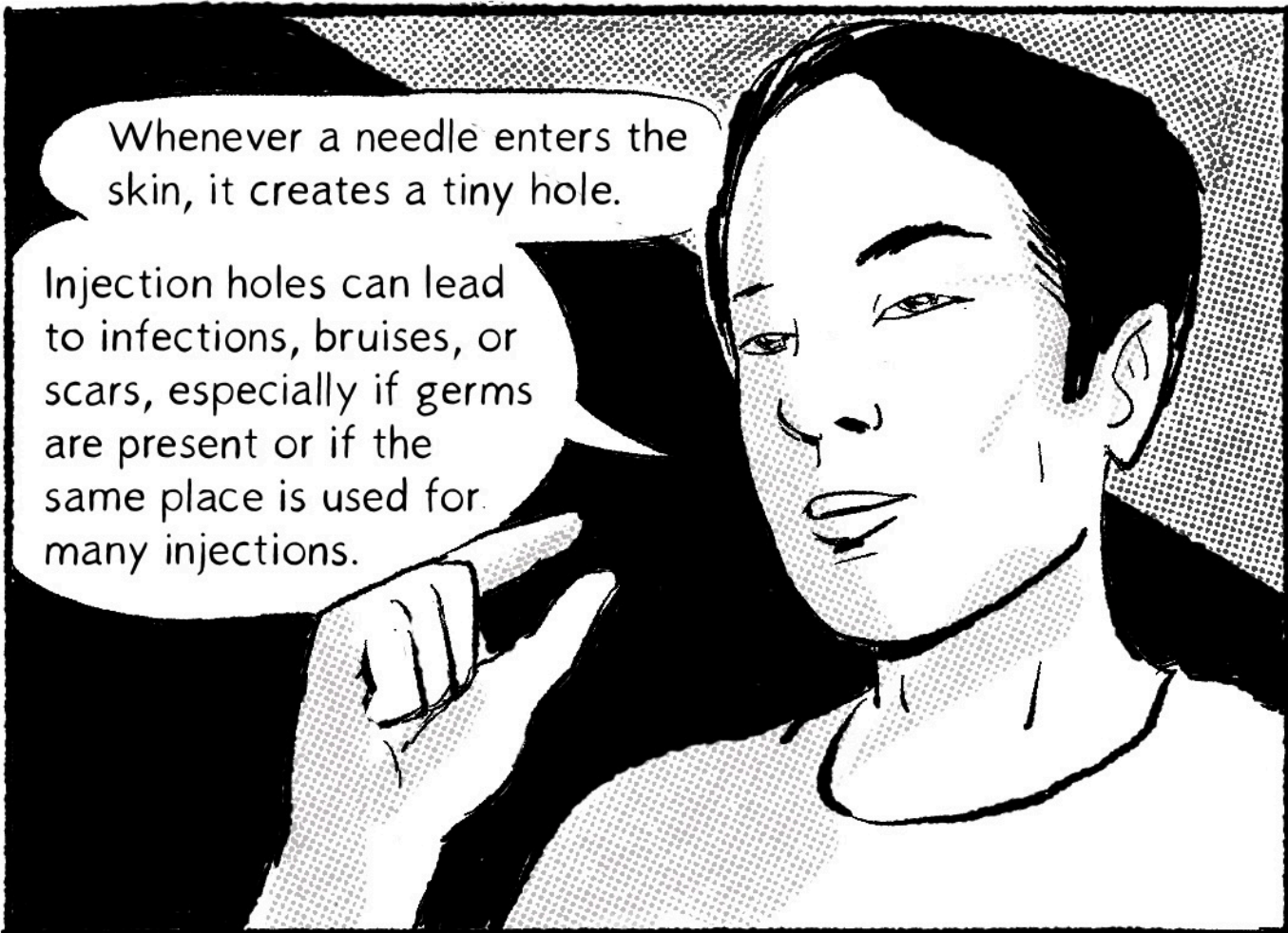
IMPORTANT



Your skin is

ESSENTIAL
to your
overall health

Take the time to take care of your skin!

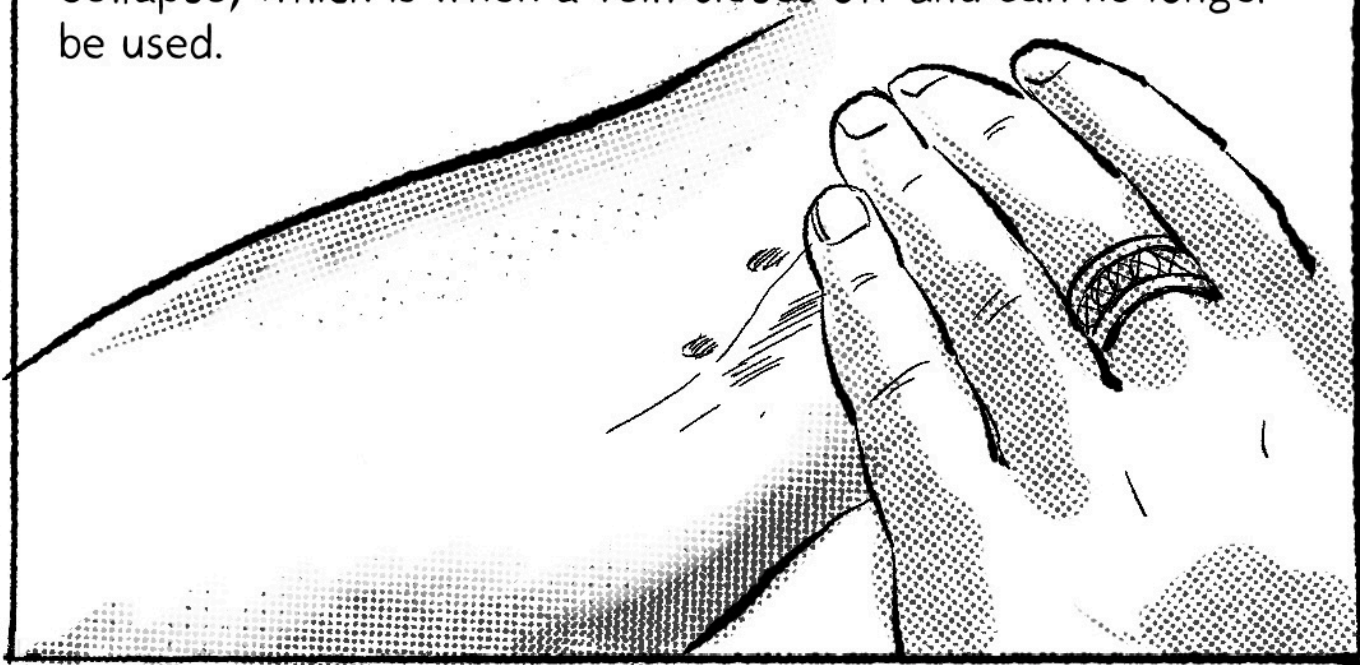


Whenever a needle enters the skin, it creates a tiny hole.

Injection holes can lead to infections, bruises, or scars, especially if germs are present or if the same place is used for many injections.

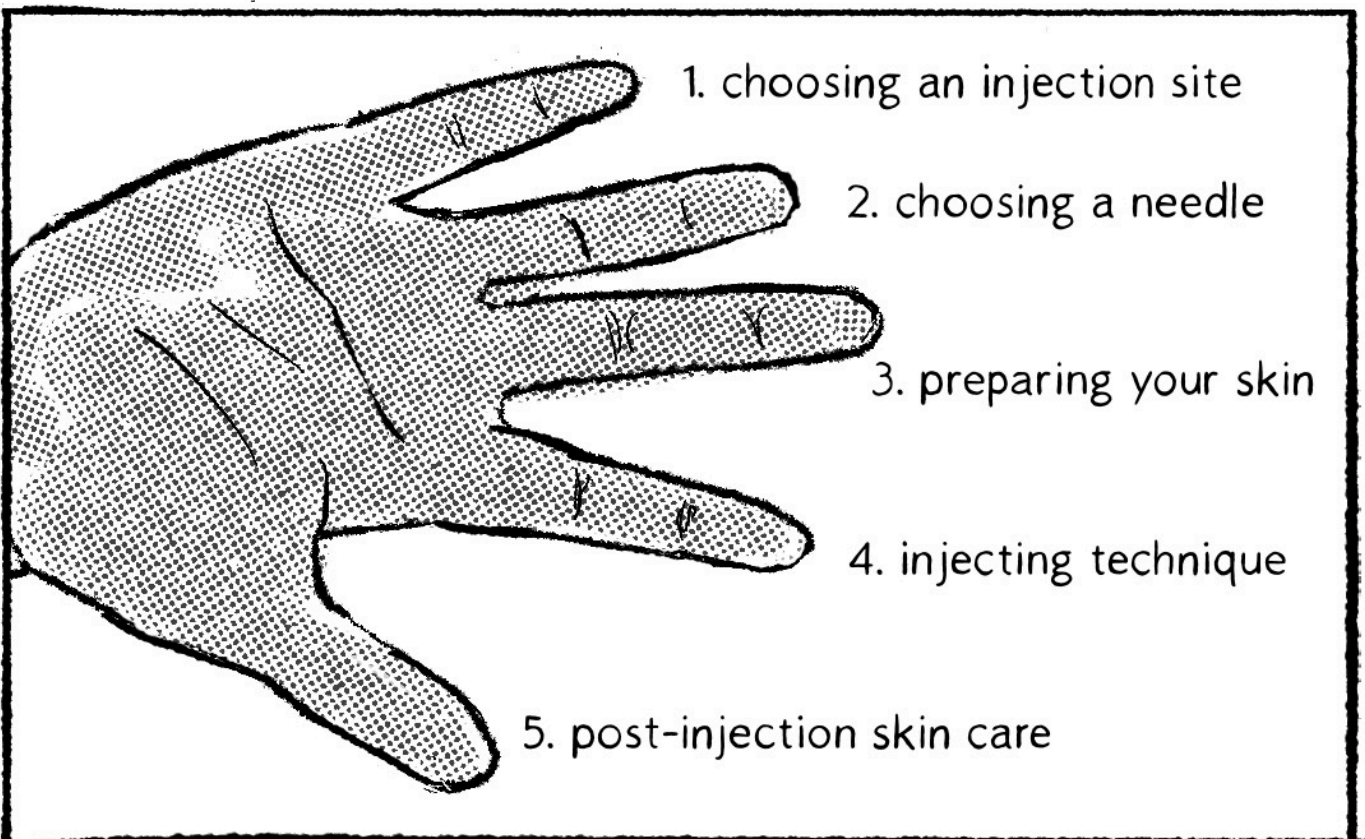
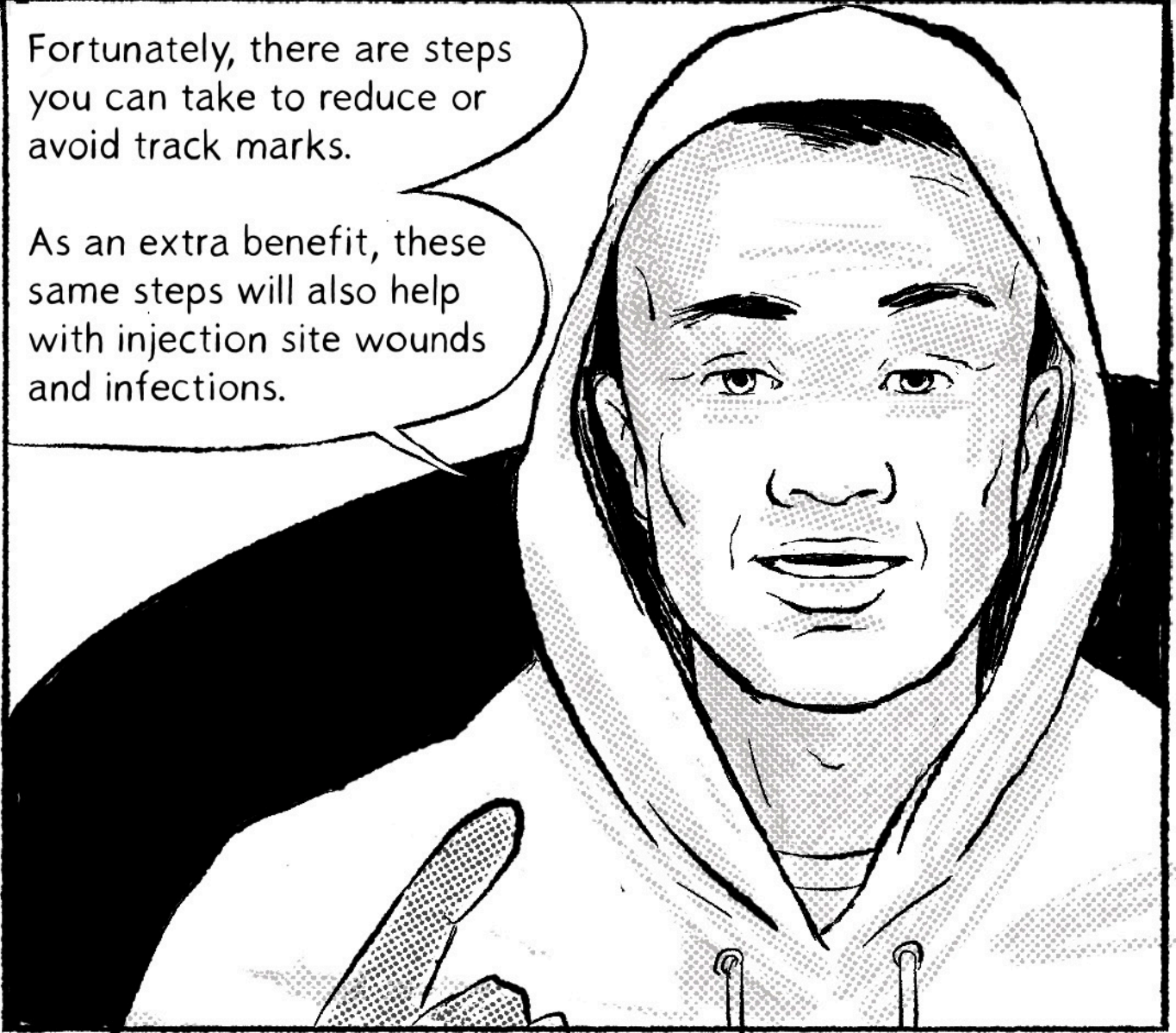
Injection site bruises and scars can be uncomfortable or painful. They can also make injecting into the affected area less comfortable and safe, since scar tissue is harder to pass through with a needle than other skin.

Over time, a buildup of scar tissue can also lead to vein collapse, which is when a vein closes off and can no longer be used.

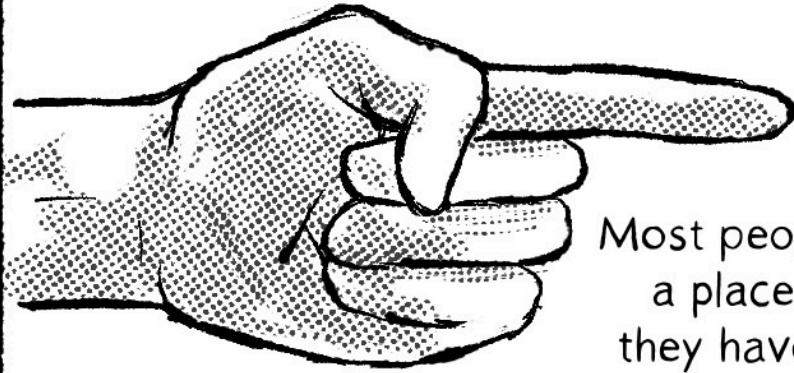


Fortunately, there are steps you can take to reduce or avoid track marks.

As an extra benefit, these same steps will also help with injection site wounds and infections.



1. CHOOSING AN INJECTION SITE:



SWITCH IT UP

Most people who inject drugs have a place they prefer to use, which they have found easy to reach and with visible, reliable veins.

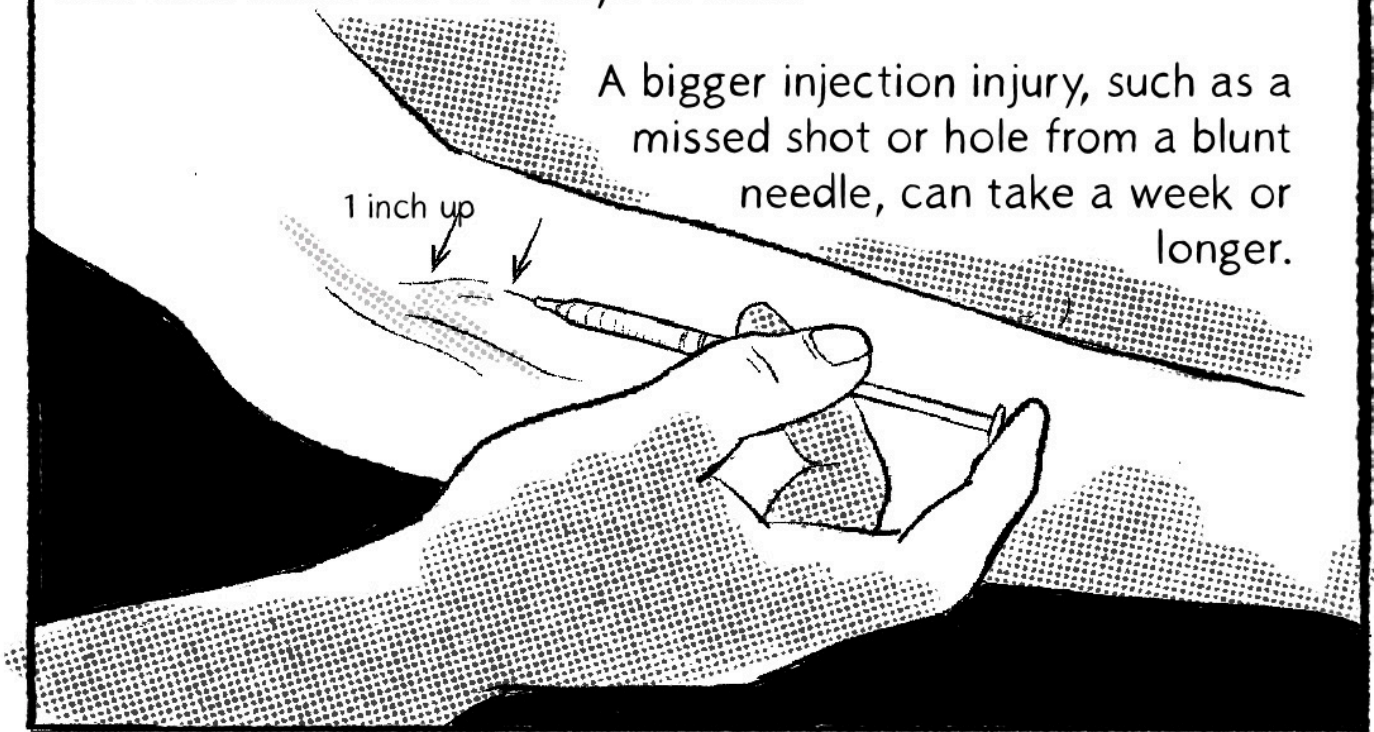
Unfortunately, always hitting the same place can mean the skin there doesn't get a chance to fully and completely heal between injections.

This can quickly lead to scars (and eventually make your preferred site unusable).



The tiny hole created by an injection may not be painful or even visible. But even a tiny, painless hole is an injury to the skin that takes about 4 days to heal.

A bigger injection injury, such as a missed shot or hole from a blunt needle, can take a week or longer.



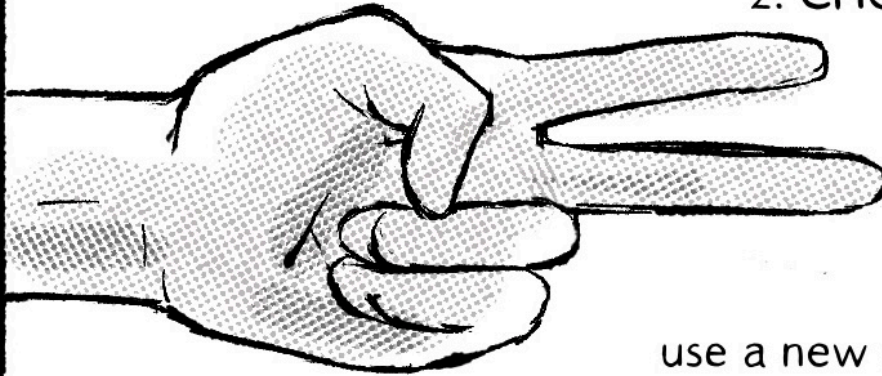
If you wish to inject while that site is healing, it's best to choose a different site. You can go one inch up on the same vein, or find a vein on a different body part.

By getting practice injecting into different places, you'll also wind up having more options about where and how to use



2. CHOOSING A SYRINGE:

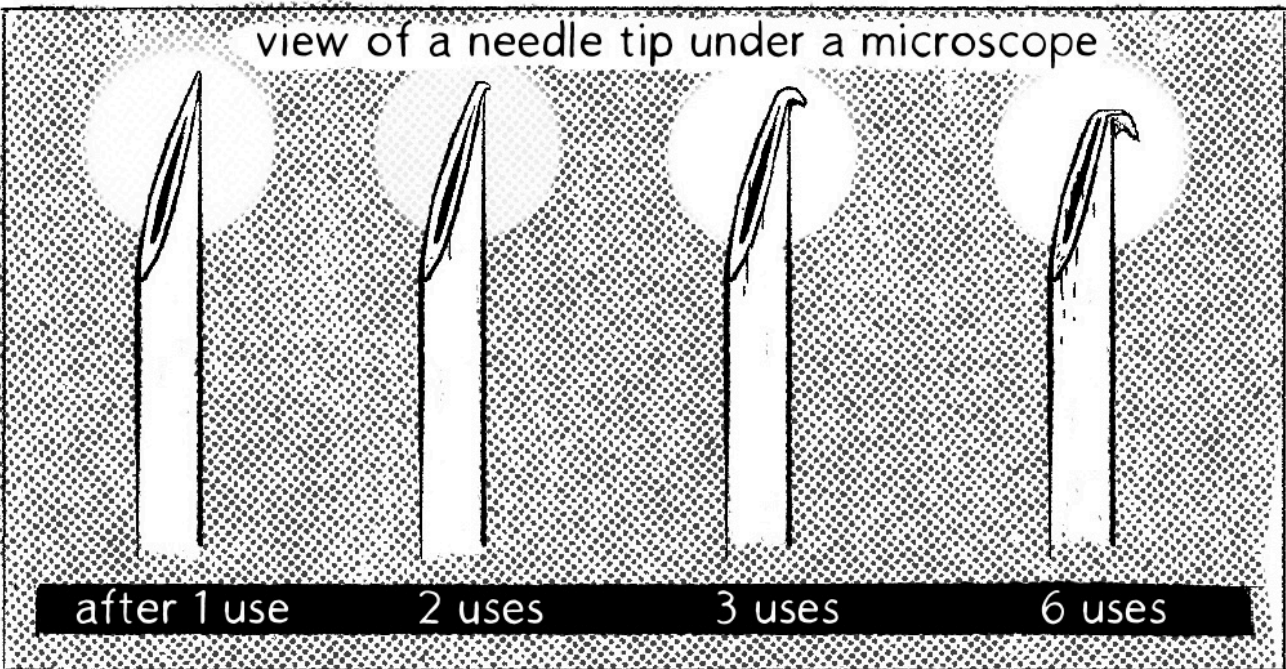
NEW AND THIN



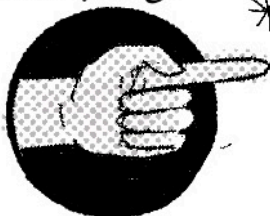
Whenever possible, use a new needle for every shot. Even a needle that has been used just once is slightly blunter and rougher than a new one, (though it may not look or feel that way).

A needle that has been re-used one or more times doesn't pierce the skin as smoothly, creating a bigger, rougher hole that takes longer to heal.

view of a needle tip under a microscope

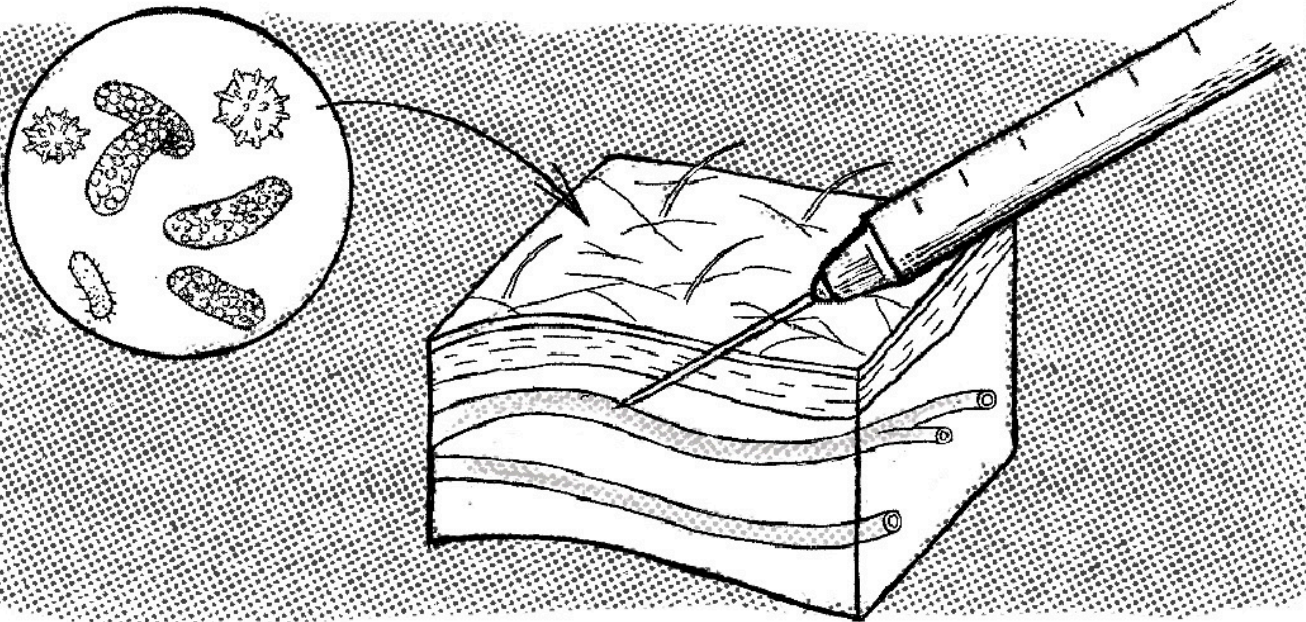


If you don't have access to a new syringe, you might consider taking your drugs a different way, such as smoking or booty bumping.



*NOTE: Sharpening a used needle by hand is best avoided- it typically causes a tiny, microscopic bend at the tip that can tear your vein.

As a bonus, a new needle that has not been uncapped will be sterile (free from germs). A non-sterile needle will usually bring some germs into the body when it enters the skin.



When the body's immune system has to fight off these germs, it slows down the healing process. Using a brand-new needle helps avoid this.

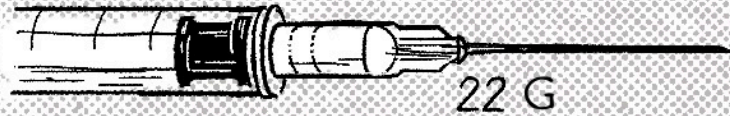
Along with new, look for thin needles when selecting. A smaller needle makes a smaller hole in your skin, which means less damage.

Needle thickness is measured in gauges. Thinner needles have high gauge numbers. So, the bigger the gauge number, the smaller the hole.

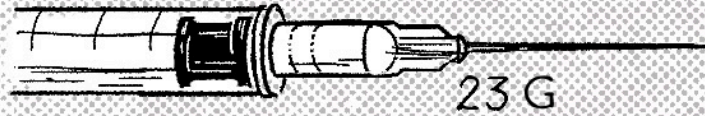




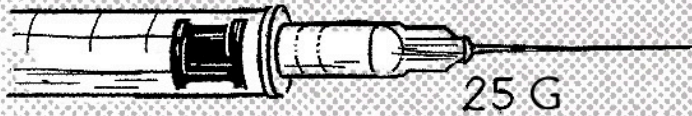
LOWER GAUGE
BIGGER NEEDLE



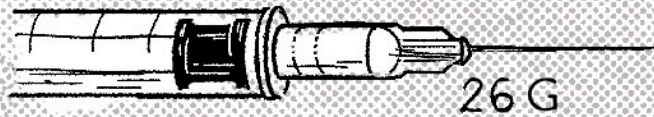
22 G



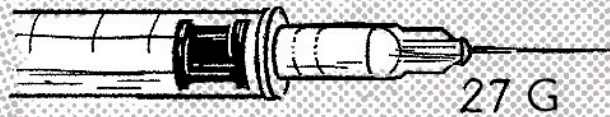
23 G



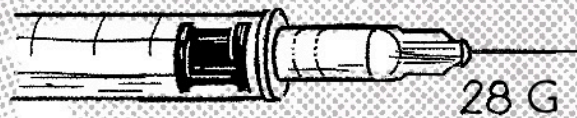
25 G



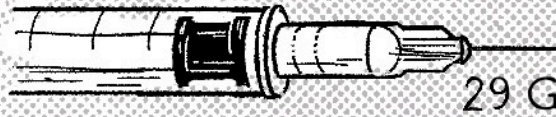
26 G



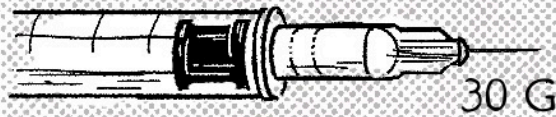
27 G



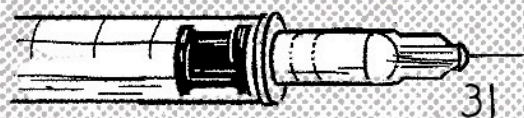
28 G



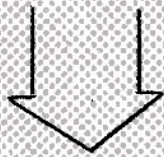
29 G



30 G



31 G



HIGHER GAUGE
SMALLER NEEDLE

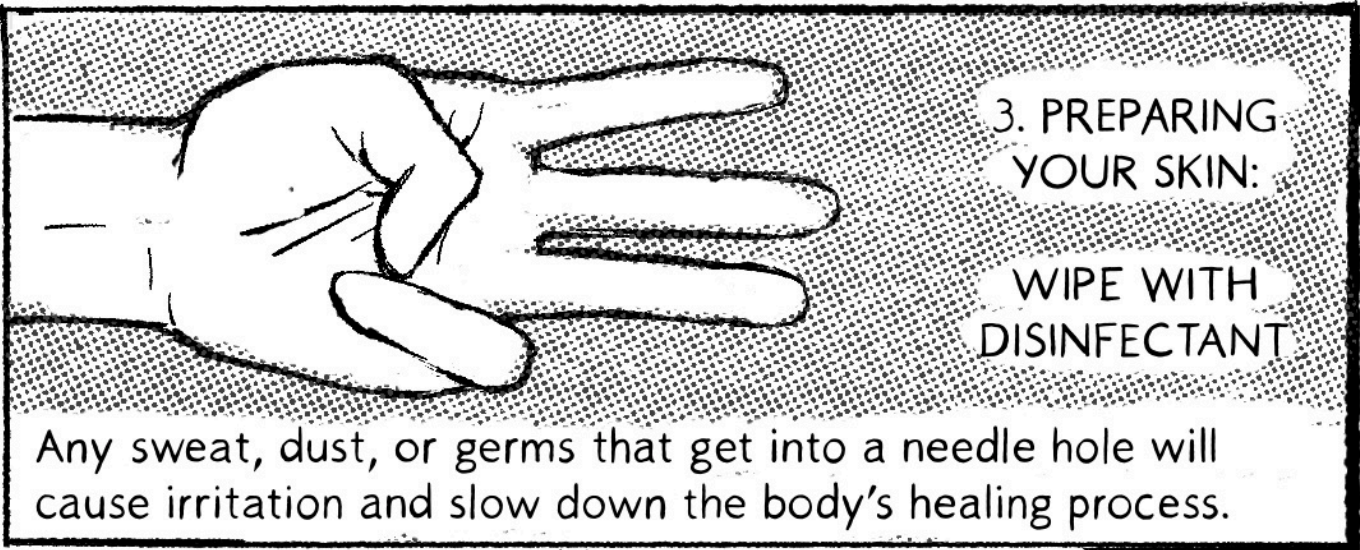
When injecting into muscle (muscle popping), a 22-25 gauge needle works best.

If you have larger veins or need to inject through a buildup of scar tissue, a 26-28 gauge needle is a good choice.

This size range is also good for injecting drugs that are thick or heavily cut (such as black tar heroin), since the thinnest needles tend to clog more easily.

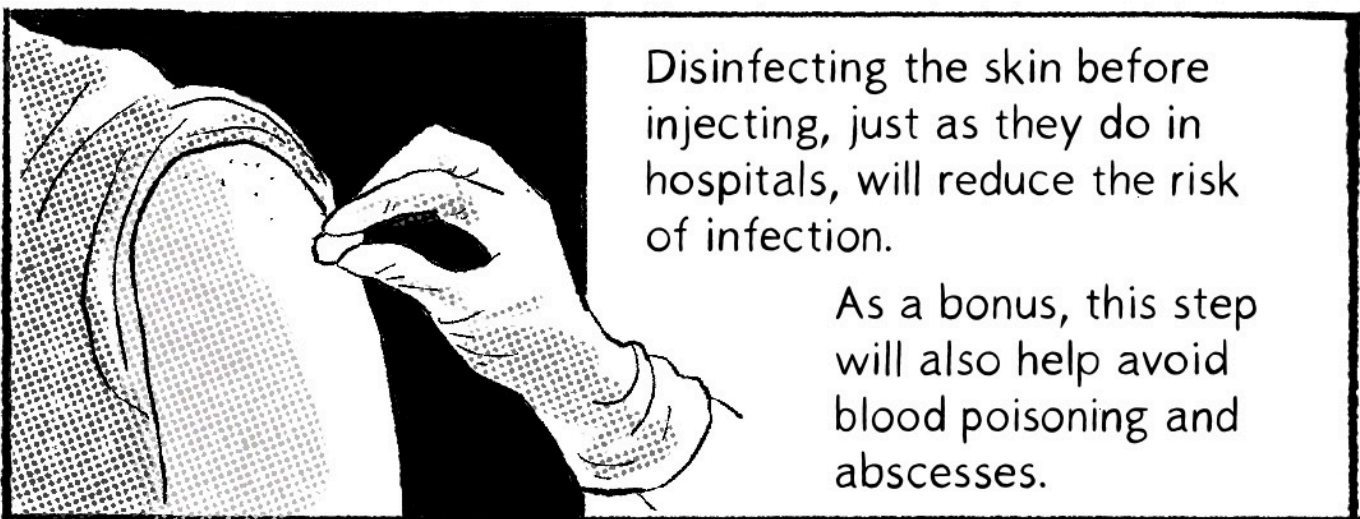
The syringes used for insulin injection have a gauge of 29-31, and tend to work very well for drug injection, especially into small veins.

Short needles also cause less skin damage than long ones. Thin needles are usually shorter. For small surface veins, a needle that is 31 gauge (super thin) and 5/16 inch (super short) is great.



3. PREPARING
YOUR SKIN:
WIPE WITH
DISINFECTANT

Any sweat, dust, or germs that get into a needle hole will cause irritation and slow down the body's healing process.



Disinfecting the skin before injecting, just as they do in hospitals, will reduce the risk of infection.

As a bonus, this step will also help avoid blood poisoning and abscesses.

A disposable alcohol wipe is perfect, but you could also use:



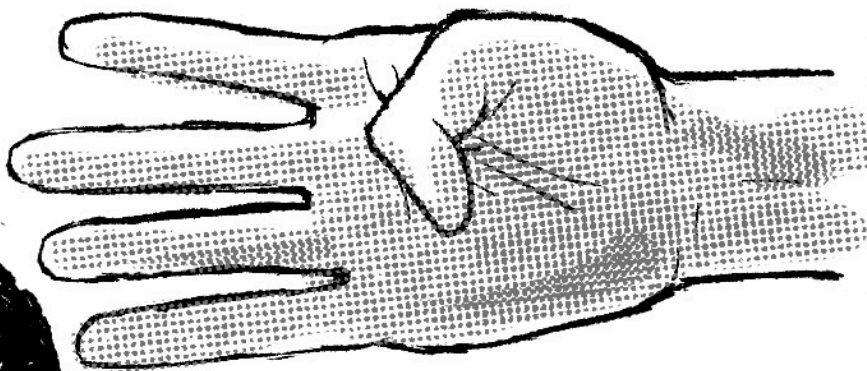
Wipe over the skin where you will inject in one direction instead of in a circle (which can spread germs around the skin).



4. INJECTION
TECHNIQUE:

SLOW, ANGLED CLOSE TO SKIN,
BEVEL UP, TOWARDS THE HEART

Easy does it...

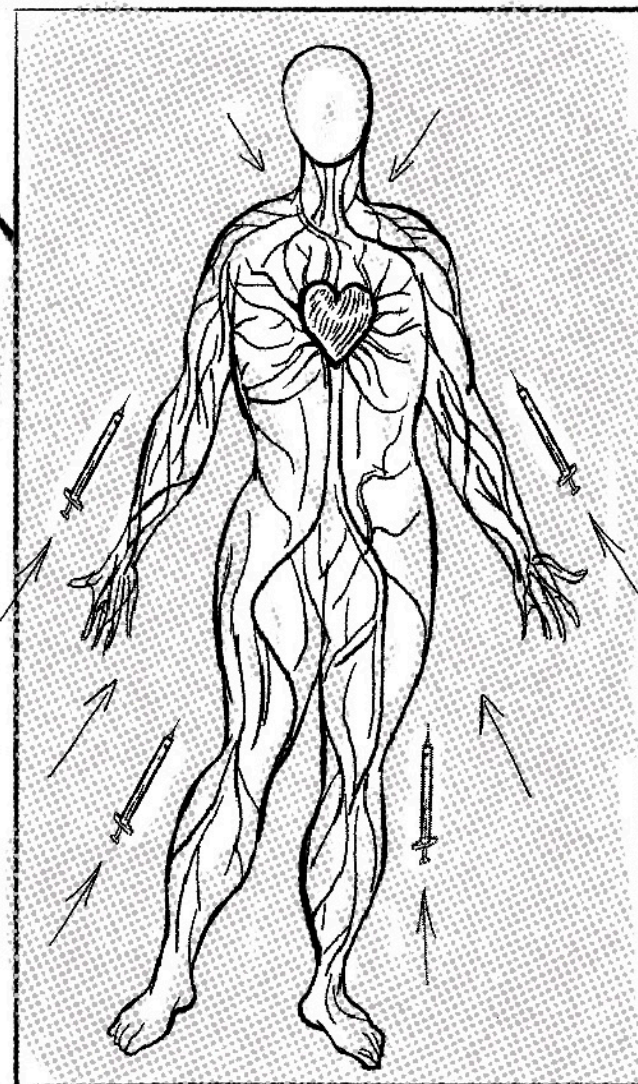


When you inject, try to take your time. This can be hard, especially if you're in withdrawal.

Slow and careful injection will mean less damage to the skin and fewer missed shots.

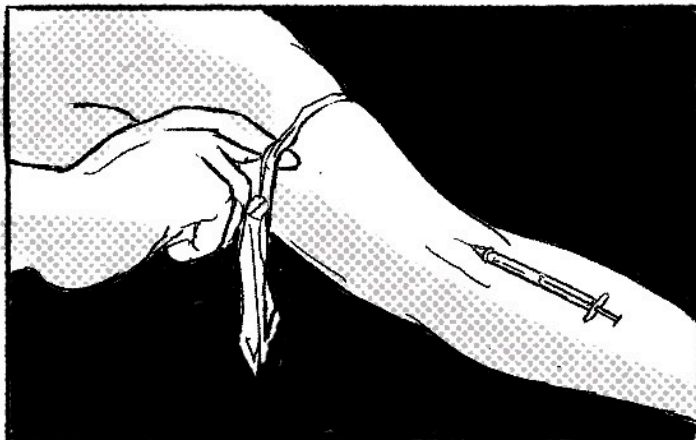
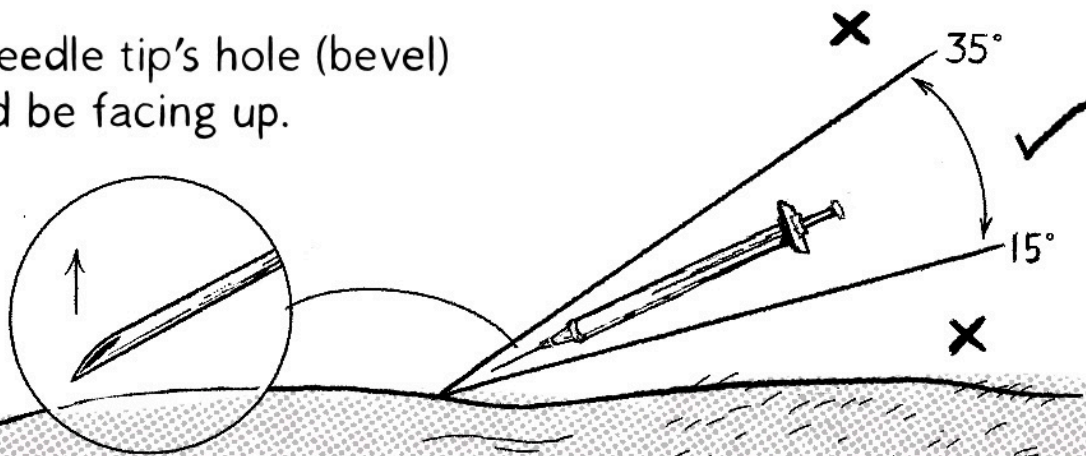


Line up your needle so that it's facing towards your heart, the same direction blood flows.



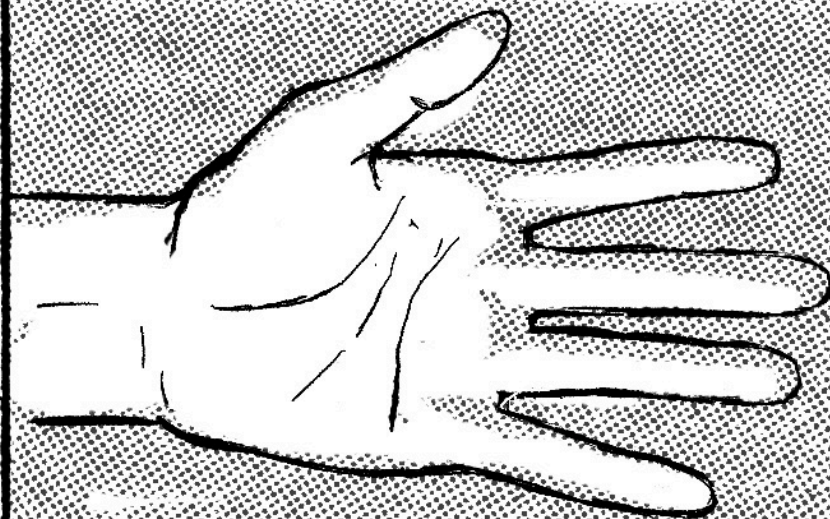
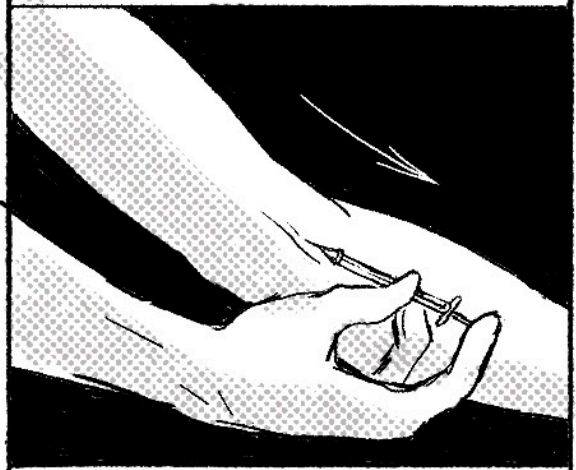
Aim it at a 15 to 35 degree angle, so that it's fairly close to the skin instead of pointing straight down.

The needle tip's hole (bevel) should be facing up.



After your needle is in the vein, before pushing in the fluid, undo your tie or tourniquet. This will help prevent bruising.

After injecting, smoothly pull the needle out at the same angle it went in.



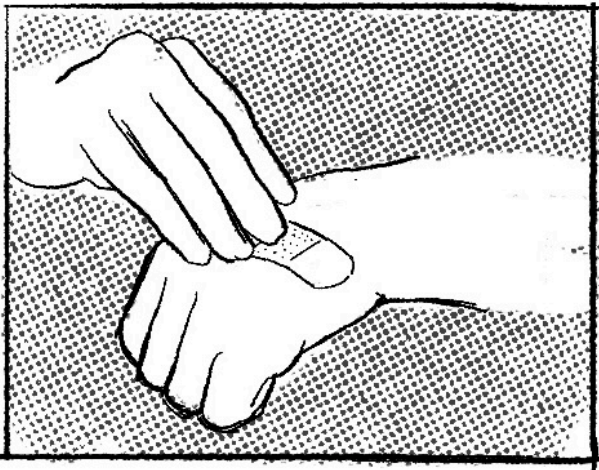
5. TREAT SKIN DAMAGE:

TOPICAL TREATMENTS

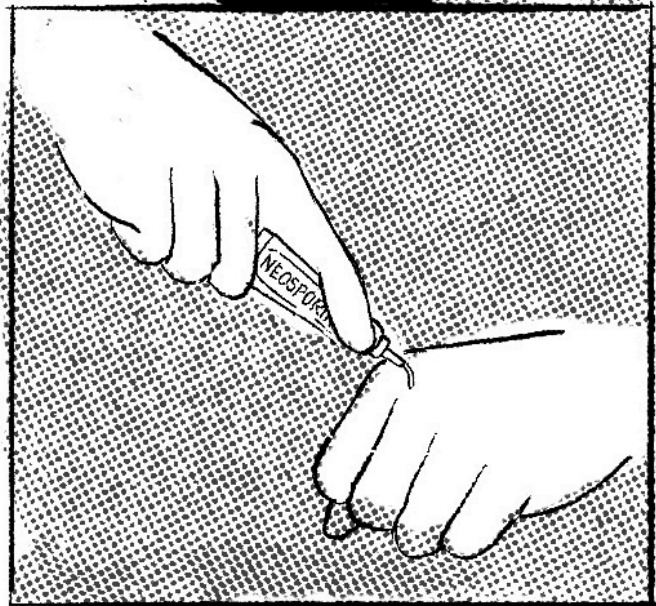
Even if you've used a new needle, disinfected, and injected properly, you can still develop a scar or infection if debris or germs or gets into the puncture hole later on.



You can cover your injection site with a band-aid right away to reduce the chance of germs getting onto it.

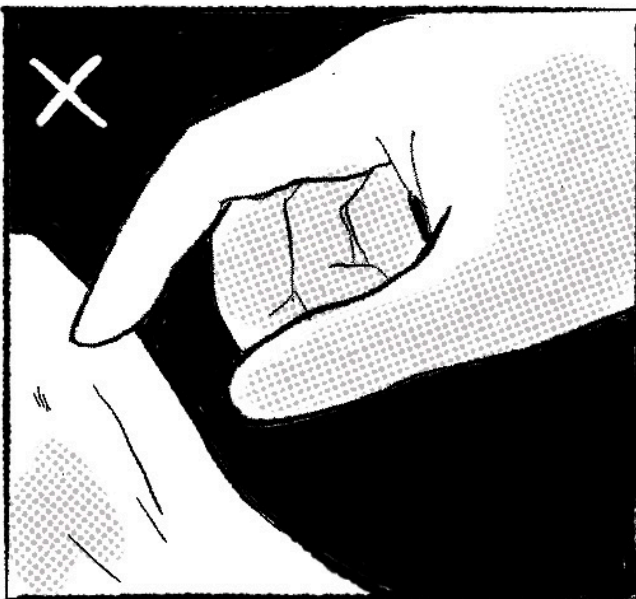
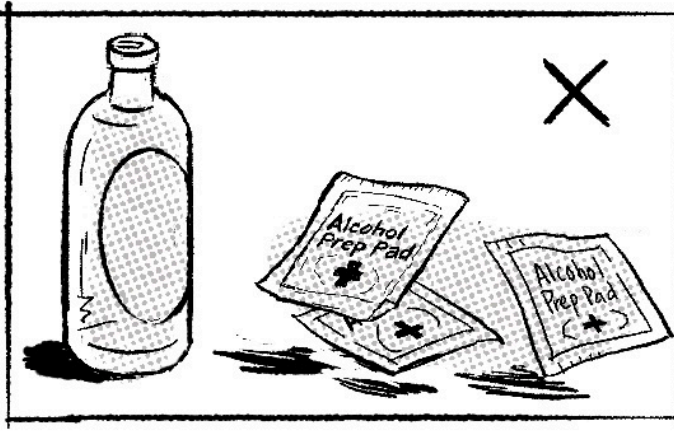


After a couple of hours, the hole will close up. At this point, you can apply antibiotic cream like Neosporin or an ointment like Vaseline.



When you shower or wash your hands, you can gently clean the area with mild soap.

Alcohol wipes are great for disinfecting the skin before injecting, but not after, since alcohol can increase bleeding and dry out your skin.

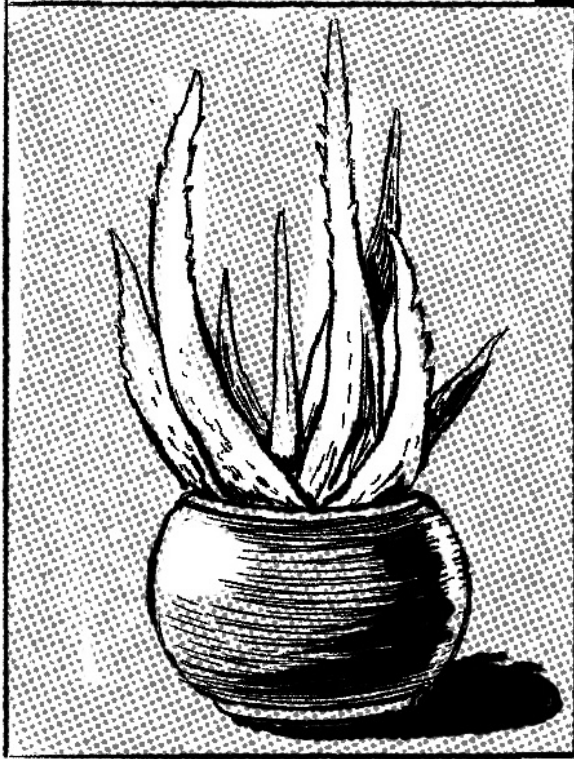
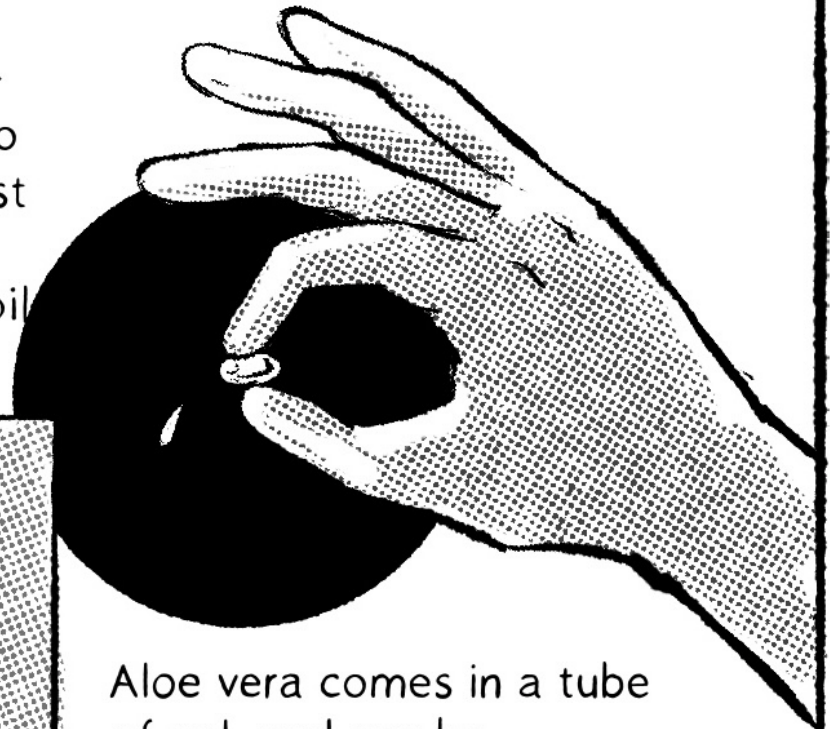


If you start to develop a scab or scar, avoid touching the area while it heals.

You can apply vitamin E oil, aloe vera, or a scar treatment gel once the site has scabbed over (and is no longer open).



Vitamin E comes in oil-filled capsules meant to be taken by mouth. Just wash your hands, pop one, and squeeze the oil onto the site.

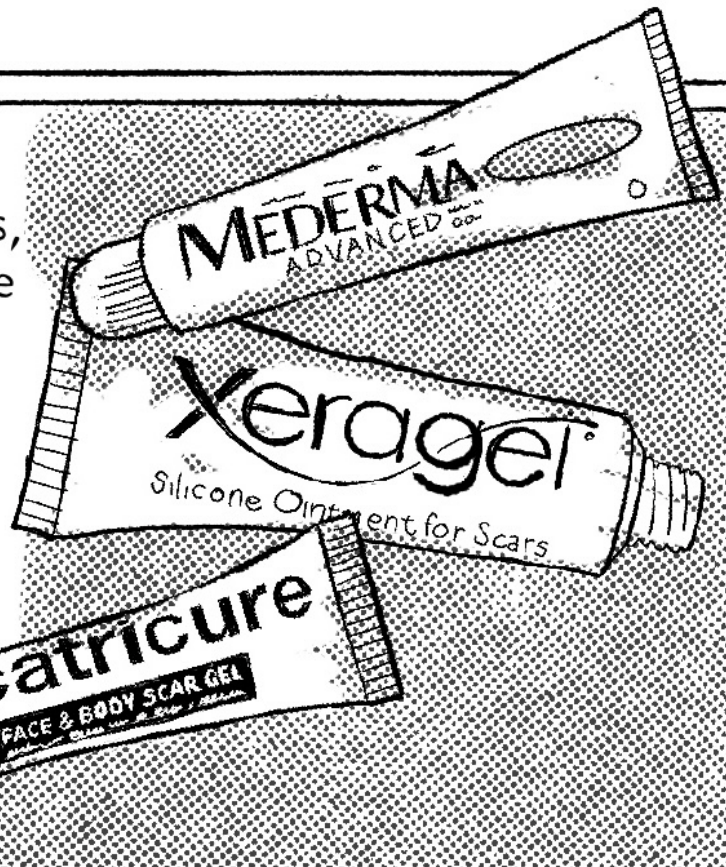


Aloe vera comes in a tube of gel, and can be squeezed on directly.

If you have an aloe vera plant, you can pick off a leaf, wash it, and squeeze the fresh juice onto a scar.

Pharmacies sell many different gels and ointments, such as Maderma, to reduce scars.

These are more expensive than vitamin E or aloe, but many people find that they are very effective.



SKIN DEEP:
FINAL THOUGHTS ON
CARING FOR YOURSELF

Finding the skin care steps
that work for you has the
direct benefit of reducing
bruises and scars.

It will also probably result
in healthier veins, fewer
wounds, and reduced risk
of developing infections.

Practicing self-care
is also an important
way to show
yourself respect and
compassion, and
invest in your
well-being.



If you do have visible scars, bruises, or other marks on your skin caused by drug use, you may have difficult feelings about them, such as shame, based on social stigma.

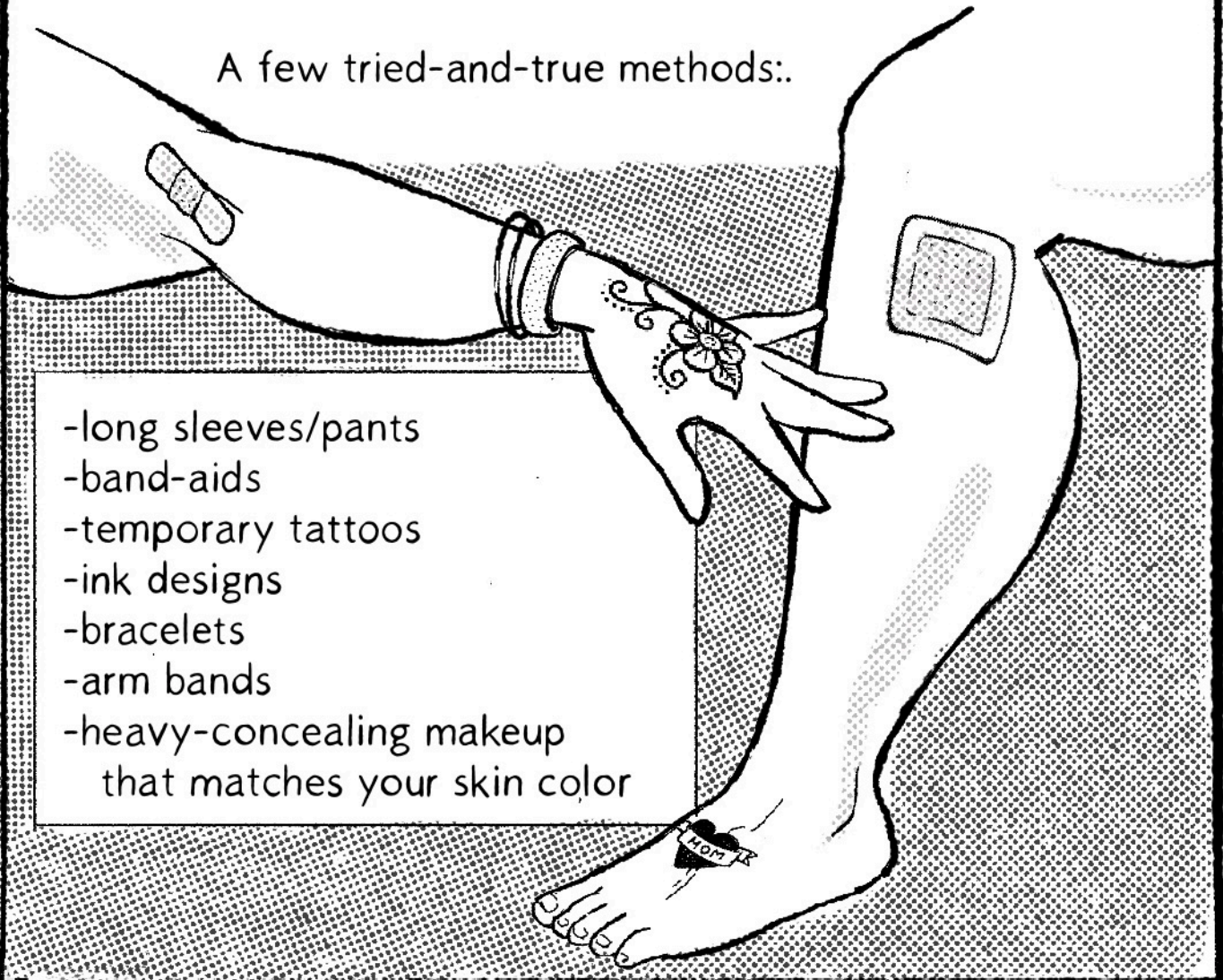


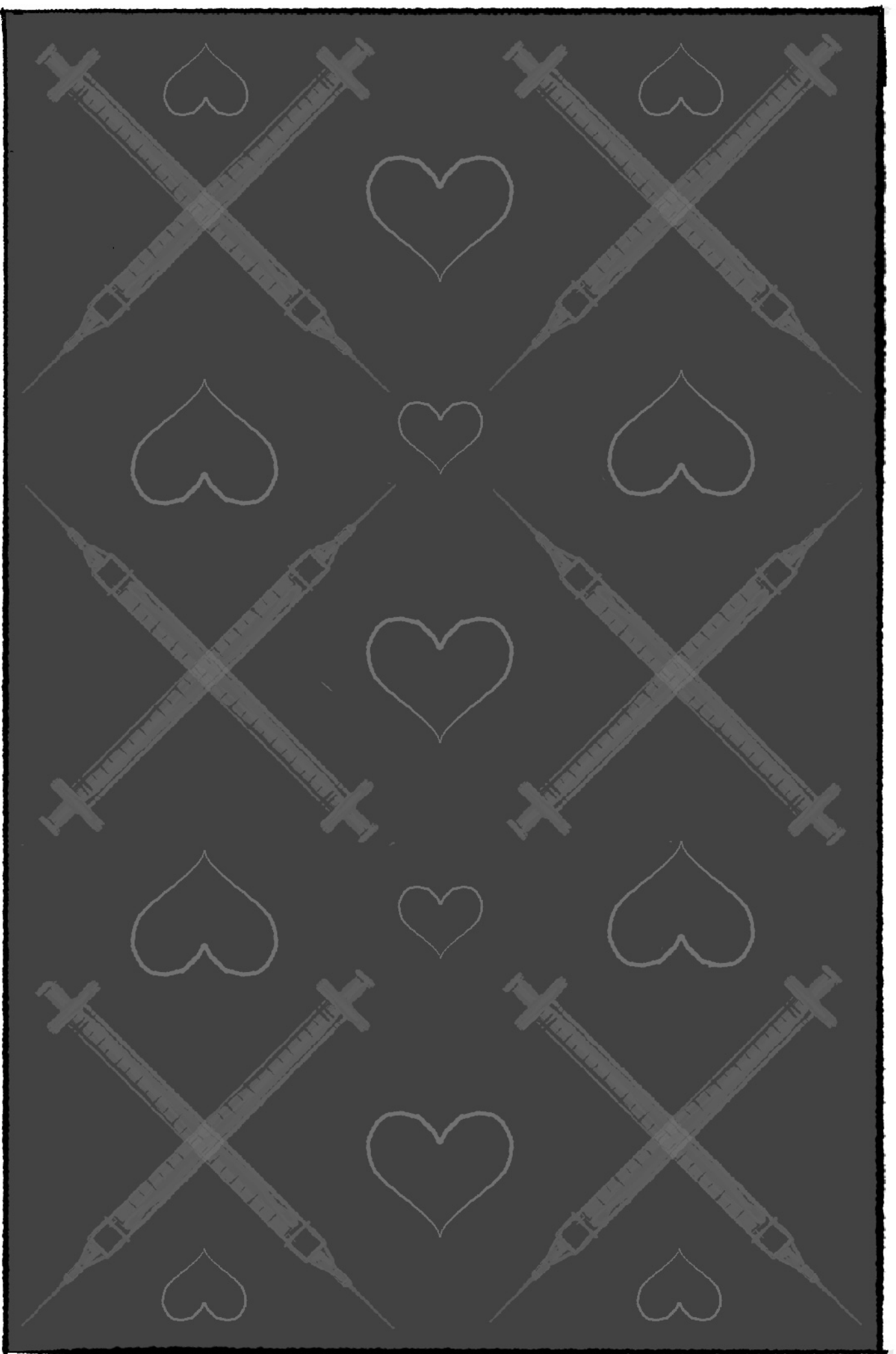
If this is true for you, you can practice self-care by viewing your skin with as much respect and compassion as possible.

One thing that makes some people feel more confident and in control is having ways to conceal marks when they wish to.

A few tried-and-true methods:

- long sleeves/pants
- band-aids
- temporary tattoos
- ink designs
- bracelets
- arm bands
- heavy-concealing makeup that matches your skin color







TL;DR

- switch up your injection site
- use a new, thin needle
- use a new alcohol wipe
- pierce slowly, at a 15 degree angle, towards your heart
- use antibiotic cream after injecting; use vitamin E, aloe, or scar gel in following days



For more information on safer injection,
visit nextdistro.org/resources

NEXT Distro is an online and mail-based harm reduction service designed to reduce opioid overdose death, prevent injection-related disease transmission, and improve the lives of people who use drugs