

Mehndi: The Art of Henna

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What is Mehndi?

-- the ancient art of bodypainting with paste made from powdered leaves from the henna plant. Mehndi originated in India (in Hindi, the word mehndi or mehendi literally means "henna"), the Middle East and North Africa. Traditionally, the hands and feet are painted before important celebrations (like weddings), and the painting process is a festive occasion as well. Usually a women's art, some cultures also henna the hands of men on the eve of their weddings. Henna has been used to decorate the skin and hair for nearly 5,000 years -- and has been found on the hands and feet of Egyptian mummies!

Patterns vary from culture to culture...in India, hands and feet are covered in intricate, lacy designs. In North Africa, more geometric patterns are preferred. In Pakistan, the initials of the bride and groom are hidden in the mehndi on the bride's palms; it is said that if the groom cannot find the initials, the wife will be the family boss.

"How To" Overview of Henna

1. Prepare henna paste
2. Clean skin to be painted
3. Apply transfer, or stencil, or boldly paint freehand
4. Let the henna dry.
5. Apply setting agent (optional)
6. Leave it on the skin for as long as possible, 4 hours is great; 10 is optimal. If it flakes off, try not to get area wet. There is still a bit of residue working until it is washed off.
7. Remove remaining henna with vegetable oil or cocoa butter
8. The stain should be a nice bright orange which will slowly darken, sometimes taking up to 2 days to reach full color.
9. Protect your stain by moisturizing. Lotions, body butters, and oils all nourish the skin and your henna stain. If you go swimming, cover your henna stain with chapstick (or some oil/wax combination) to form a barrier against the water.

Recipe

Recipes do not have exact measurements -- more alchemy than applied chemistry. All henna recipes should be prepared in plastic, ceramic or glass bowls, using plastic utensils. Henna reacts with certain metals which causes weird colors (usually a greenish cast). Leftover paste will keep in the fridge for about a week; longer than that and it starts to lose staining power. You can freeze henna paste for up to 6 months.

Natasha's Simple Recipe

- 1 tbl henna powder
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 tbl filtered or distilled water
- 1 packet lemon powder
- 1/8 tsp lavender or eucalyptus essential oil
- More water as needed for texture

Put sifted henna powder in a bowl (1 tbl). Mix dry ingredients with enough water to make a mealy paste. Let sit for 15 minutes. Then add in lavender oil and mix well. Add drops of the lemon-water until you have a nice creamy texture (kind of like pudding). Let sit for an hour, then spoon into your applicator and start drawing! On very hot days, the dye can release quickly. Once your henna has a brown film over the top of the green paste, it is ready to mix. Wait too long and it loses its staining power.

Skin preparation

Traditionally rosewater or orange water is used to remove any excess oils and dirt from the skin before painting. However, you can use any astringent lotion, alcohol, or even soap and water. I like to use alcohol with a few drops of lavender and eucalyptus essential oils to keep it from smelling too medicinal.

Application

There are almost as many methods of application as there are recipes. Some of the more popular (from traditional to modern) are: stick (e.g. toothpick or bamboo skewer), paintbrush, cone (e.g. something akin to a cake decorating cone), syringe (no needle, of course!), squeeze bottle, and squeeze bottles with special metal tips for very fine lines. Experiment to find what works best for you. I prefer to use a cake decorating cone with a fine tip. I get good control and it's easier on the hands than a small squeeze bottle. Since it takes some time for the stain to set you have some leeway for correcting mistakes.

Setting agent (optional)

Once the henna is applied and dried, you can apply a setting agent to help keep it on the skin, and to further activate the henna staining compounds. Traditionally, a mixture of lemon juice and sugar has been used -- carefully daubed on and allowed to dry. The sugar creates a protective crust and the lemon juice activates the henna. You can also add a drop or two of clove oil to the lemon and sugar mix. I make a fairly thick lemon-sugar syrup by measuring the sugar first, then adding just enough bottled lemon juice to make a syrup. If you have enough sugar in your henna paste, you can skip this step.

Heat

Stay warm. Heat increases the absorption of the dye. Heating pads are nice, as are microwaveable heat pads and blow-drying. You can wrap the design with toilet paper or an ace bandage once the henna is completely dry. If the design is on your hands or feet, wear gloves or socks. If you start to sweat, lower the heat...a little sweat is good because it encourages the henna into making a very nice dark stain -- but **too much sweat will make the design smudge!**

Timing

Try to leave the henna on the skin on as long as possible. Two hours is minimum. Six hours is better. Overnight is preferable. Stay warm. Think warm thoughts. Have a cup of something hot. Cuddle with your cat or dog...

REMEMBER:

M*A*T*H:

M- Moisture - Keep the henna moist, it keeps staining.

A- Acidity - Lemon or lime juice helps the henna stain better.

T- Time - The longer the better.

H- Heat - The warmer the better, sweat 'til you can't stand anymore!
(this acronym is thanks to Carrie of Red Veil Henna in Boulder, CO)

Removal

Let the henna paste flake off by itself. Try to avoid getting water on the design for at least several hours. For stubborn paste, use a small amount of olive, almond, or other food-grade oil to massage off the henna paste... as a last resort, you can rinse off the paste. Avoiding water makes sure there is a residue of henna on the skin that continues to work even if most of it falls off.

Aftercare

Mehndi can last anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. The darkness and intensity is a result of many factors: quality henna, skin chemistry, heat, and setting time. You can help it last longer by moisturizing the area and avoiding harsh chemicals and exfoliants. Swimming pool chlorine causes rapid fading as do chemical sunscreens. Lipbalms made with an oil and wax combination are the best for protecting your henna from water.

Resources for the Henna Artist

There are several great resources online for information and supplies:

For supplies:

Amerikan Body Art has a great selection of products, from henna to glitter to facepainting supplies. She has excellent service and it's great about returns and exchanges.

<http://www.amerikanbodyart.com/index.html>

Jessica at **the Henna Caravan** has a good selection of henna kits and supplies. She sells super sifted and very consistent henna powders. Her gallery is excellent. She's based in LA, so shipping is super-fast if you are in Southern California.

<http://www.hennacaravan.com/index.html>

Darcy from **Henna Guru** (<http://www.hennaguru.com>) imports henna directly from Rajasthan in India. It's fresh; it's strong; it's lovely stuff. She also sells hand-rolled cones and a book of designs. She's based in San Francisco.

Wardah Halim of **Hennatrendz** (www.hennatrendz.com) lives in Chula Vista, CA. She sells both powdered henna and pre-made cones of excellent quality. She also sells glitter and hand-decorated candles.

For the East Coasters:

Khadija from Henna Sooq (<https://www.hennasooq.com>) sells both henna for hair and skin, as well as hand-crafted soaps, shampoos and hair products. She has extensive YouTube tutorials on ayurvedic hair treatments. She is based in Baltimore, MD.

Some good YouTube tutorial channels:

BlurberryBuzz Body Art: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRd9nhPRU3PiBYzxU46Y5MQ>

Henna Sooq: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkvzJI34MR25wNz40yGbkXw>

For other stuff,

Dharma Trading sells Jaquard bottles and tips at the best prices I've seen. They also have syringes without needles. www.dharmatrading.com

Silly Farm aka Mama Clown is an online resource for glitter powders. I really like the Ben Nye metallic powders. www.sillyfarm.com

And don't forget Amazon.com for books on henna!

Mehndi : The Timeless Art of Henna Painting by Loretta Roome is a timeless classic. The photos are gorgeous and inspiring. ~\$12 from Amazon

Mehndi : The Art of Henna Body Painting by Carine Fabius is an interesting book and has great pattern ideas. ~\$8.50 from Amazon

Henna from Head to Toe! by Norma Paeskoff Weinberg has great illustrations by Catherine Cartwright Jones, with excellent ideas for building designs ~\$17 from Amazon

The Art of Henna: The Ultimate Body Art Book by Pamela Nichols is gorgeous -- very inspiring photos

Plus, there are a zillion books published by Dover that are great design sources for henna.

Also, check out Pinterest and Instagram for amazing ideas and inspiration!