



FINGERNAIL CARE

HEALTHY NAILS

Healthy fingernails are important not only for their cosmetic appearance, but for the protection and function they offer our hands. Most problems with fingernails are due to trauma or irritation. To have better nails, we must be aware of the injurious things we do to our nails every day. The most common reason that healthy people have damaged nails is a combination of exposure to water and wet things plus physical trauma. Exposure to water, chemicals such as soap, alcohol, and bleach, and wet items such as foods or garden plants, will weaken and ridge the nails. Trauma can then fracture and split an already weakened nail. Protection of the hands is essential to beautiful, strong, and healthy nails. Below are some basic tips for achieving and maintaining beautiful nails.

PROTECTION

Use cotton-lined rubber or plastic gloves when doing wet household chores in order to avoid contact with soaps, detergents, and chemicals. Wear thin cotton “dermal gloves” (available in drugstores) when doing dry household chores. Always wear gloves when you garden and always wear gloves in cold winter weather. Wear clean gloves when preparing and handling food.

Never dial a phone with your finger; instead, use a pencil. Do not dig blindly in your purse. Use the soft part of your fingertips, not your nails, for grabbing. Nails used as tools break easily and often. Learn to sweep small objects such as coins off a table rather than picking them up with your nails. If you always pretend that you are trying not to smear wet nail polish, then you will use your hands carefully and almost never break a nail.

NAIL CARE

Repair your manicure with an extra “top coat” of nail polish every few days. Do not remove old polish and re-polish frequently, as nail polish remover may excessively dry the nails. Paint nail polish over the edges of nails to protect them. Daily filing of small snags or irregularities helps prevent breakage. Shape your nails by filing with the finest file you can find. Round nails gently. Never file down at the corners or create points. Do not roughly dig debris out from under your nails; use a soft toothbrush if you must clean under the nails.

Nail polish remover is made with acetone or similar drying substances. Use a polish remover with oil or other lubricants added to minimize the drying effect. Always wash off any polish remover that remains on the skin or nails. Do not chip or peel your nail polish off as this also weakens the nails. Cuticles can be pushed back when hands are wet (or after soaking fingers in mild soapy water), using a hand towel or finger (not finger nail). If necessary, cuticle remover may be used during a professional manicure. Keep cuticles soft with frequent application of hand moisturizer. Special purchase of cuticle cream is not necessary. Clip off hangnails at the base with sharp, clean scissors; do not pull or pick them off.

SPECIAL PRODUCTS

Nail polish protects your nails. Use a base coat so your manicure will chip less and last longer. During the week, reinforce your manicure with reapplication of a clear quick-drying top coat. Nail builders and polishes containing protein do not make the nails stronger, but may make the polish stick better or last longer. Nail polish with nylon fibers will add strength, as will hardeners containing nylon fibers (such as Hard as Nails). Several coats of regular nail polish will also strengthen fragile or splitting nails. Nail hardener liquids containing formalin or formaldehyde will harden the nail, but must be applied only to the free end of the nail (never to the nail over the nail bed or in contact with cuticle skin). Formaldehyde frequently causes itchy rashes, and may make the nails brittle, causing them to crack.

Nail glues, patches, and mending kits can be used for splits. Reinforce the repair with mending papers. If no mending paper is handy, try paper from a tea bag. Wrapping may aid in achieving longer nails. Infrequent, painful reactions are sometimes seen. Old home remedies to strengthen nails that are really NOT helpful include iodine, hydrogen peroxide, gelatin, seaweed or kelp, calcium, and multi-vitamins. People with slow-growing nails or whose nails split at the edges may benefit from **long-term use of a vitamin called Biotin, 2.5mg per day by mouth** (available at health food stores and pharmacies).

SEPARATION OF NAIL FROM NAIL BED

Separation of the ends of some fingernails from the underlying nail bed is usually caused by injury from cleaning under nails and from water trapped under the nail. The problem may be worsened by infection, usually yeast or bacteria (less common causes include sun sensitivity and allergy to nail treatment products).

The most important step in treatment is to completely stop cleaning under the nail. The hands should be kept out of water as much as possible. Nails should be cut shorter to avoid some of the daily catching and bumping that happens more to long nails. If dark green or other discoloration is present, a medication can be prescribed to put under the nails to fight infection; however, if you are unable to keep your nails dry, the medicines may not help.

DISEASES

More severe nail problems, which may require additional evaluation and treatment by a dermatologist, include paronychia (inflammation and infection around the nail), psoriasis, tumors, warts, injuries, fungal infections, and ingrown toenails. Not all nail problems are correctable, but a dermatologist can diagnose and treat many problems to help give you the best looking nails possible.

FUNGAL INFECTIONS

Fungal infection of the fingernails is rare. Toe nails are much more commonly infected with fungus because of chronic athletes' foot infection. Most finger nail infections are caused by yeast. If you have a fungal infection of your finger or toe nail, it must be proven by culture before therapy is started. There are several oral medicines that clear fungus (Lamisil, Sporonox) in four out of five patients, but the infection almost always recurs. These pills are used for 3-4 months, during which time you must be monitored by frequent blood tests because they can cause serious side-effects including liver damage. Again, they may clear the nails for some time, but they almost never completely cure fungal infections. Topical medicines may be helpful for some people with nail fungus. They are safe, but must be used for months to years to clear fungus; they only work in about half of the patients who have true fungal infection of the nails. Nail fungus is not contagious, nor is it harmful to healthy people. You may choose to live with toenail fungus; groom and polish your fungal nails as you would your normal nails.

