



Nails of steel

Brittle, ridged, yellow, gnawed or frail nails may be a sign of deeper health issues. Help is at hand for naturally nice nails without the nasty chemicals.

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Groomed nails are an obvious part of personal hygiene and key to a polished appearance, but nails are also important indicators of our overall health. While nail quality is partly determined by your genetics and habits, the state of your talons can also reveal underlying health conditions.

Keratin claws

The nail has both living and non-living components. The overlying nail plate is dead, but the skin beneath the nail is living. Despite this dead outer layer, it's vital to watch what you put on your nails as they are more porous than skin and absorb harmful agents (as well as beneficial balms).

The nail is composed of the nail plate (the visible overlying layer), a matrix, which is the underlying vascular layer that produces the plate, and a bed, which is the pink skin under the nail plate. The paronychium is the soft tissue border around the nail, the lunula is the white crescent at the base of the nail and the cuticle is the thin tissue that emerges from the nail's base.

Containing an average of 50 layers of alpha-keratin protein, fingernails grow around three-and-a-half millimetres a month, whereas toenails grow about half that rate. The more fingernails are used, such as the index finger, the faster they grow. Fingernails take three to six months to completely regrow and toenails 12 to 18 months.

Handy tools

We tend to take our nails for granted, but think of all the things you couldn't do effectively without fingernails. Backscratching, nose picking, knot untying, splinter scavenging, finger tapping, guitar strumming, flower plucking and scratching off stains all depend on your nails. At a push, they also double as an inbuilt weapon system.

Nails protect your digits from damage and soft tissue injury. The counter-pressure posed by nails when you touch something enhances the sensitivity of your fingers and toes. Without them, you would be less able to feel textures.

Nail news

Both conventional and complementary medicine practitioners use nail diagnosis as a barometer for body health. Healthy nails are strong, smooth, convex, with equal thickness, have white moons and are translucent at the bed and white at the tips. If you have any nail concerns, it is best to consult your health professional for a diagnosis.

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Find out what your nails are saying with the following rough guide.

Discolouration

Funny-coloured nails can be due to chemicals, chemotherapy, dyes, medications, nail polish, nicotine, infections, injuries or melanoma.

Yellow and thickened nails point to fungus. Black nails can be due to injury or melanoma. White marks or leukonychia on nails may signify low albumin, protein deficiency, trauma to the area, low zinc or iron or antibiotic use. A white line can indicate heavy metal poisoning such as arsenic. The entire nail turning white sometimes relates to heart disease or diabetes.

Lifting nail

This disturbing look can be due to hardening chemicals such as formalin,

rough removal of fake nails, psoriasis or a fungal infection.

Splitting or peeling nail

This may be due to extreme dryness, continuous trauma, excess washing, nail polish or chemical use. Consider checking the thyroid if the problem persists.

Thickened nail

Psoriasis or a fungal infection is the most common cause of nail thickening. Injury, arthritis and trauma are other possible factors.

Ridged nail

This is a common symptom which may be normal depending on the person. Nails tend to get more ridged with age, illness, deficiencies and arthritis. Infections, lichen planus, lupus and topical chemicals can also contribute to ridges.

Inflammation around the nail

Staphylococcus aureus infection can cause a bacterial infection of the skin bordering the nail. This may progress to paronychia presenting with pain, redness, swelling and sometimes pus around the cuticle. Chronic paronychia can cause nail lifting, thickening and discolouration.

Crumbling or flaking nail

This is usually due to polish, nail glue, shellac or fungal infections.

Ingrown toenail

A poor cutting technique, trauma, tight shoes or very concave nails can contribute to this painful plight.

Thin lines of red or splinter haemorrhage

This can indicate anaemia, injury, infective endocarditis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Bluish or purple fingernail beds

Low oxygenation, poor circulation or anaemia may be evident.

Horizontal transverse grooves

Known as Beau's lines, these can be due to ageing, diabetes, peripheral vascular disease or illnesses associated with a high fever, such as scarlet fever, measles, mumps and pneumonia.



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Brittle nails

Wetting and drying nails frequently can cause brittle nails. Lack of fatty acids may be another consideration.

Soft or weak nails

This may be exacerbated by deficiencies, overexposure to water or chemicals such as cleaning products and nail polish.

No half-moons (lanulas) or a pale nail bed

This may indicate anaemia, poor circulation, lung disease or congestive heart failure.

Pitting

This can be connected with psoriasis or low haemoglobin.

Puffy nail fold

This may be related to arthritis, lupus or infection.

Finger food

Healthy nails are by-products of a healthy body. Supportive nutrients to produce “phenomenails” include vitamins A, B complex, C and D, biotin, collagen, calcium, essential fatty acids, iron, magnesium, probiotics, protein, silica and zinc.

Mineral-rich herbs such as alfalfa, *Dunaliella salina*, horsetail, oatstraw, dong quai, gotu kola, nettle and shatavari help nourish nails.

Feed your nails with foods high in minerals, fatty acids and protein such as eggs, flaxseed oil, nuts, dark leafy greens like kale, legumes, oats, wholegrains, seaweed and sesame seeds.

Tissue salts for weak, brittle nails include six times potency each of kali sulph (potassium sulphate), nat mur (sodium chloride) and silica (silicon dioxide). Homoeopathic calcarea carbonica and silica can also help nail issues.

Nail love

Hands are a very visible accessory. Nurture your nails with these essential dos and don'ts.

- Avoid nail no-nos such as harsh chemicals, strong soaps, pushing back cuticles, biting nails, ripping or scratching off polish, pulling off nails (including artificial ones), aggressive nail cleaning, smoking, going barefoot in communal places, tight-fitting shoes, neglecting nail problems and gardening without gloves.
- Harmful nail product chemicals to avoid include formaldehyde (potentially

carcinogenic), toluene (causes headaches) and dibutyl phthalate (disrupts hormones, kidney and liver function). Parabens, silicone, colophonium, TPHP, tert-butyl hydroperoxide, organic halides and animal-derived ingredients should all be excluded from your manicure.

- Aim to wear gloves when doing jobs involving water or chemicals and moisturise your hands and nails frequently.
- Wear well-fitting shoes, but also enjoy some barefoot time.
- Opt for acetone-free nail polish remover, buff nails rather than polish them and experiment with DIY treatments instead of risking infections at public salons.

Nail biter

Nibbling nails is a common habit that ranges from occasional pecks to a mutilating obsessive-compulsive disorder. Clinically called onychophagia, nail biting is more common in perfectionists and people who bore easily, according to a study by the University of Montreal.

This pathological grooming behaviour is often triggered by anxiety, restlessness and stress. It can also be due to a genetic predisposition or a medication side effect.

Gnarled nails aren't the only side effect

of nail biting. Considering fingernails are twice as dirty as fingers, the bacteria can cause infections, inflammation, diarrhoea and vomiting. Picking below the cuticle also changes the way the nail grows out.

Tips for your tips

- Identify your triggers and substitute this automatic response with an alternative behaviour such as three deep breaths or a stress ball.
- Get a manicure to keep nails too nice to ruin.
- Trim nails short so that it's difficult to munch them.
- Paint nails with a bitter substance to deter biting.
- Cover nails with gloves or artificial nails.
- Chew gum or suck on something to occupy the mouth.
- If biting persists, consider seeking professional help from a hypnotherapist, cognitive behavioural therapist or preferred practitioner.

Cute cuticles

Cuticles are important slivers of skin that act as a protective barrier. Nail technicians may cut cuticles for aesthetic reasons but this exposes your nail beds to infections and inflammation. Alternatively, apply a cuticle oil or moisturiser to the base of your nails to soften cuticles, before gently pushing them down with a wooden manicure pusher, also known as orange sticks. This makes the nails appear longer and smoother. Cuticle oils can also enhance nail growth, strength,





flexibility and manicure longevity.

Chief educator at Paintbox Nail Studios, Evelyn Lim, recommends cuticle oils containing jojoba and vitamin E, which penetrate deeply to lock moisture into the nail plate. Other oils to pamper cuticles include argan, avocado, castor, grapeseed, sweet almond, apricot kernel, hemp, moringa, rosehip, sea buckthorn and wheatgerm. Diluted essential oils, such as citrus, eucalyptus, lavender, rosemary or tea tree bestow additional antibacterial and antifungal actions.

For baby-soft hands, massage warm oil into your nails for five minutes. Complete the treatment with a nourishing hand moisturiser and a warm, damp towel wrapped around the hand for five minutes.

Natural mani-pedi

We have been keeping our talons in tip-top shape with herbal soaks, masks, oils and polishes since ancient Egyptian times. Soaking nails in warm green tea is an ancient beauty ritual used to strengthen nails and reverse yellow discolouring.

A silica-rich herbal mask can also purify and fortify nails. Try mixing ¼ tsp hydrolysed marine collagen, 1 tsp horsetail decoction, 1 tsp nettle leaves decoction, 1 tsp argan oil and 1 dessertspoon of green or kaolin clay with enough pure water to form a smooth mud. Apply to nails and leave on for half an hour before washing off with warm water. Follow

with a deep-moisturising hand cream, preferably containing shea butter, lanolin and nourishing oils. To heighten hydration after applying moisturiser, wear waterproof gloves for a few hours.

Perfect polish

Many people find buffing is enough to create healthy, shiny nails. Non-toxic nail polish is another viable and available option thanks to the rise of natural cosmetics companies. When checking labels, it's crucial to avoid toxic chemicals including formaldehyde, toluene, dibutyl phthalate (DBP), camphor, xylene, triphenyl phosphate, ethyl tosylamide, colophonium and silicone.

Alternatively, have fun formulating this DIY mix with basic ingredients sold by Amazon, eBay or beauty suppliers.

You will need:

- Mixing balls
- Empty nail polish bottle
- Non-toxic suspension base
- Mica powder
- Funnel
- Measuring spoons

1 Place two mixing balls in a nail polish bottle and fill the bottle with the non-toxic suspension base.

2 Pour 2 tsp mica powder into the bottle using the funnel. Or start with 1 tsp and add until your desired colour is achieved.

3 Screw on the lid and shake.

An alternative is natural henna dye, which

has been applied in India and the Middle East for centuries. Henna will turn your nails into a burnt orange shade, which can last until it grows out but generally fades within a few weeks. Apply the henna paste to dry nails with a nail polish brush. Let it dry for an hour then wash off with lemon juice or apple cider vinegar. Coat with a natural clear top coat for a glossy finish.

Clean slate

Have you noticed that when you remove nail polish your nails look dry, brittle and dead? Peeling off shellac or acrylic nails can do irreparable damage, too. Traditional acetone-based nail polish removers can cause dizziness, dryness, redness, irritation and headaches. Natural alternatives include ethyl acetate, hydrogen peroxide, lemon juice, isopropyl alcohol and vinegar. Adding emollients such as soya bean oil, olive oil, jojoba oil or vitamin E oil to nail polish remover will reduce its dehydrating effect.

Nurturing your nails does more than make you look good, it's an easy self-care ritual that can boost your mood and provide some much-needed you-time. Try a manicure to brighten your mood or a pedicure to put your best foot forward. 🌿

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