

## NAIL HEALTH IN WOMEN

### Healthy Nails

Nails are not only cosmetic. They protect fingertips (and toe tips), gauge how much pressure is put on the soft parts of the fingers and help with performance of tasks, such as picking up objects, buttoning clothing or playing a musical instrument. Maintaining functional nails throughout life is critically important to our daily work. Nails can be easily damaged and should not be used as tools.

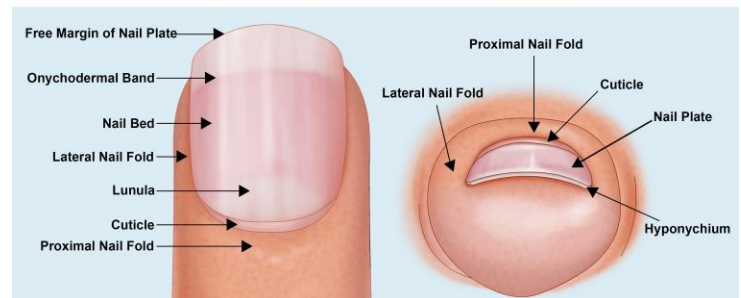
Healthy nails are shiny, smooth and uniform in consistency. They are not cracked, rigid or broken. There are no pits, dents or discolorations. The nail plate is firmly attached to the nail bed underneath and to the proximal and lateral nail folds surrounding it. The cuticle is a thin strip of clear skin that covers the space between the nail plate and the proximal nail fold. A healthy cuticle adheres to the nail plate and prevents the entry of infectious organisms, such as bacteria or fungi. The visible nail bed is pink. The free margin, which extends beyond the nail bed, is white. A healthy nail has slight curve. Many over-the-counter products claim to improve nail health. However, there is little evidence that these products improve nail quality or provide any benefit.

### Routine Nail Grooming

Because fingernails grow approximately 3 mm per month and toenails 1 mm per month, they must be routinely groomed. Healthy grooming practices include cutting fingernails straight across and rounding the edges. Rounding the edges of toenails more than slightly may increase the risk of ingrowing and should be avoided. Cuticles should be left in place, not cut or pushed back. The nail surface should not be filed because filing thins the nail plate and makes it prone to splitting. Sharp objects should not be placed under the nails as this may cause a separation of nail plate from nail bed (onycholysis) and again increase the risk of infection from bacteria and fungi.

### Nail Cosmetics

In addition to routine nail grooming, we may choose to use nail cosmetics to enhance the appearance of nails. Usually nail cosmetics do relatively little harm. However, in some cases nail cosmetics may lead to substantial and sometimes permanent nail changes that worsen the appearance and/or function of the nail. One example of this is the formation of a scar (called a pterygium) that may be caused from the use of gel (photo-cured) nails. Other potential complications of manicures and pedicures include inflammation of the nail folds (paronychia), onycholysis, fungal infection of the nail (onychomycosis), green nail (colonization of the nail by the



bacteria *Pseudomonas*), and brittle nails. Healthy grooming practices should always be used even when nails are being cared for in a salon. Some choose to take their own nail instruments to the salon to avoid instruments that have been used on other clients and, therefore, decrease the risk of infection.

### When to See Your Dermatologist

Nail disorders, which may be due to nail cosmetics, complications of nail grooming, the aging process or other causes, are the main complaint in 10% of all medical visits to dermatology. You should see your dermatologist for any nail problem particularly one that is painful, worsening or becomes chronic (lasts more than six weeks). Diagnosing and treating a nail disorder of any kind early is key to more quickly returning the nail to its functional, beautiful state.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Reinecke J, Hinshaw MA. Nail Health in Women. *Int J Women's Dermatol* 2020;6(2):73-80.

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