

finger looking good

HOW TO SPOT AND PREVENT COMMON NAIL PROBLEMS

by Dr Wong Su-Ni

Healthy nails – smooth, shiny, pink and strong, with an even band of white at the free end – everyone wants them, but not everyone is fortunate enough to have them. Sometimes, abnormal nails are due to inherited skin and nail diseases, but more frequently, they arise from poor hand and nail care, environmental factors and infections. In these cases, the changes are preventable and may be reversible.

Common Nail Problems

1. Dry, dull nails

Nails can become dry and dull with repeated wetting or soaking in water, old age, and chemicals such as detergents, alkalis, oils and solvents including alcohol, thinner, kerosene, nail polish and nail polish remover.

Prevention includes protecting the hands from repeated wetting by using gloves when washing dishes, clothes or bathrooms, reducing frequency of hand washing, avoiding direct contact with chemicals, minimising usage of nail polish, gentle soaps and moisturising twice daily.

2. Nail splitting

Fragile nails that split easily are most commonly due to weathering, from repeated wetting with subsequent drying or chemical damage by alkalis, detergents and solvents, especially in older age. Other conditions that cause splitting, usually near the nail fold, include certain skin conditions that can affect the nails, such as psoriasis, certain oral medications and tumours beneath the nail matrix (where the new nail is being formed).

Avoiding repeated wetting and contact with chemicals can help to prevent this problem. Once it occurs, it is best to consult a dermatologist to rule out medical problems. Taking biotin supplements has been reported to help reduce nail fragility.

3. Yellow discolouration of nails

This is usually from separation of the nail from the nail bed and occurs most commonly at the free edge of the nail or at the sides of the nail. By far the most common causes are fungal infection,



psoriasis and trauma, especially from shoes or manicure, and occasionally from using fingernails as screwdrivers and staple removers! Eczema of the nail bed from any cause, including contact dermatitis to nail polish, paint remover and other solvents, can also cause the nail to "lift off".



Yellow discolouration of nails and rough "sandpaper nails" from psoriasis

Rare causes are certain medications, skin diseases and inadequate blood supply to the fingers. A dermatologist would be in the best position to assess and manage the cause of such nail changes. With repeated wetting or soaking in water, water, bacteria and fungus tend to collect under the nail in the "dead space" created, leading to secondary infections. Chronic infection by a certain species of water-loving bacteria produces a characteristic greenish-black pigment.

4. Thickening of nails

A normal fingernail is about 0.5mm thick and toenail about 1mm thick. Nails may become thickened, often becoming yellowish-brown when the nail bed or the nail matrix is affected by disease.



Thickened nails from fungal infection

This ranges from treatable causes such as fungal infection, eczema and ill-fitting footwear, to those that are more difficult to treat, such as psoriasis and other rare skin diseases, or a single traumatic damage to the nail matrix. A dermatologist will usually take nail

clippings for examination, to see if there is a fungal infection, which is usually treated with antifungal tablets.

Thickening of the last toenail on both sides is commonly seen and quite harmless. It occurs as a result of repeated pressure and rubbing from footwear. There is no effective treatment for this.

5. Brown or black streaks in nails

These can result from blood under the nail from trauma or underlying systemic diseases such as lupus, liver cirrhosis, vascular diseases and so on. They can also be due to pigment produced by fungal infection, melanin pigment from moles in the nail matrix in Asian and dark-skinned individuals, or malignant melanoma (an aggressive pigmented type of skin cancer) affecting the nail matrix.



Brown-black and yellow discoloration from fungal infection of the finger and thumb nail



Dark brown discoloration of the nail from malignant melanoma of the nail fold, which has spread to the surrounding skin

If there is no recent trauma to the nail, it is advisable to see a dermatologist to rule out serious and treatable causes. Melanoma is rare in Asians, but develops most commonly in Asians on the feet or toes, and may spread elsewhere through the bloodstream. Early diagnosis and treatment is essential to prevent spread.

Blood clots from traumatic injury such as heavy object falling on toe, repetitive pressure against shoe especially during sports will eventually grow out as the nail grows out.

6. Swelling of nail fold with secondary nail changes

This is most often due to repeated wetting or immersion in water, with resulting loss of cuticles (the skin that seals the junction between the nail and nail fold). This allows water and bacteria and fungus to enter under the nail fold, to where the nail matrix is. Fungal infection, deformities or destruction of the nail may then occur. With bacterial infection, the nail fold may become red, swollen and painful and require oral antibiotics. For this reason, it is not advisable to push back or damage the protective cuticles during manicures.



Loss of cuticles and chronic swelling of nail folds, with secondary yeast infection resulting in ridging and discoloration of nails.

7. Ingrown toenail

The corner of the big toenail grows inwards, cutting into the skin, causing pain, redness and swelling, which may require a course of antibiotics initially, and possibly some nail surgery later. This is usually due to ill-fitting footwear or poorly trimmed nails, and occasionally from inherited nail abnormalities or bone deformities. Toenails should be cut straight across, without cutting into the corners, and footwear should have enough space at the toes to allow some movement.

Tips for healthy nails

Seven tips for healthy nails under the mnemonic **NAILGLO**:

- 1. Next:** You don't want to be next in line after someone with fungal infection of the feet and/or nails, without ensuring that the equipment is adequately disinfected in between. This goes for nail spas, pedicures and even those foot massage chairs commonly found in public places. Do check out the hygiene before putting your foot in!
- 2. Air your feet:** Keep feet cool and dry in our warm humid climate by wearing sandals or open footwear whenever possible. If socks must be used, use cotton socks and change them daily.
- 3. Instruments:** Bring your own manicure instruments or check that your manicurist sterilises hers properly.
- 4. Leave slippers on:** Especially in common areas such as showers, where one may pick up fungus or wart virus.
- 5. Gloves:** Use long rubber gloves when washing dishes, clothes or handling household cleaning detergents or bleach. Keep a second pair handy in case water gets into the first pair.
- 6. Loving care:** Nails require tender loving care too. Use gentle cleansers, and moisturise your hands, cuticles and nails daily.
- 7. Open toe shoes/sandals:** Best for reducing pressure on toenails and for aeration! Ensure that toes are not squeezed when choosing footwear.

The above are but just some of the things that can go wrong with the nails. If the nail looks obviously abnormal, it is always safer to have them checked out by a dermatologist, as certain nail changes are associated with systemic illnesses, while others may be infectious or cancerous.

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