

Healthy nails mean healthier fingers and toes

By Teddi Nicolaus

Be they sharp, bitten or polished to perfection, your nails serve a variety of purposes. They act as coverings for the tips of your fingers and toes by shielding nerves, blood vessels and bones from injury and infection.

Nails also help us get a grip on things and perform tasks like typing, opening cans and scratching an itch. They also enhance our sense of touch.

"Nails serve a variety of functions," says Thomas Stringer, MD, MS, a board-certified dermatologist at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and an assistant professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine. "For starters, they protect the very tips of our fingers and toes, because the bones of our fingers and toes are very close to the skin."



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Take a look at your fingernails. Nails are made of keratin, which is a hard, rigid protein similar to the claws, hooves and horns of other animals. In fact, scientists think human nails evolved from the claws and talons of our ancestors who needed them for climbing trees, grabbing branches and performing tasks necessary for survival.

Unlike wild animals, humans aren't likely to rely on rough rocks and hard ground to keep their nails trimmed and healthy. Most of us know it's up to us to keep our nails trimmed and neat.

Nail hygiene can range from indulging in a luxurious pedicure at a salon to using nail tools at home. Some folks see the salon route as a tried-and-true maintenance strategy, with the only tricky part being picking nail polish color combinations. For those who choose the do-it-yourself nail clipper route, the tricky part might be twisting down to reach your toenails.

But nails are more than just cosmetic features, and keeping them trimmed isn't just for show. Nails are intricate biological structures that provide insights into our overall health and serve critical protective functions, Stringer says.

When he's evaluating a patient's nails, Stringer pays close attention to key features like the nail folds, or the skin around your fingernails and toenails. He also looks at the cuticle, which is the thin, clear strip of skin at the bottom of the nail and above the nail

fold. And he looks at the "lunula," the pink or pale half-moon on the nail plate above the cuticle.

"I want to see a healthy nail fold and a nice cuticle," Stringer says. "I don't want to see any inflammation or swelling around that nail fold."

The nail plate itself — the hard surface we often paint or trim — should also be smooth and evenly colored, Stringer says, noting he looks for a uniform sort of "pink tone" throughout the nail. Variations in color, including yellowing, white spots, thickening or unusual pigmentation, may signal underlying health issues like

psoriasis, nutrient deficiencies, or even heart, kidney or liver problems.

"Far and away, the most common nail disorder we see is just plain old nail fungus," Stringer says.

"Anytime we see kind of a thickening of the nails, or a lifting of the nails, it could suggest nail fungus."



Ingrown nails are the most common and easily preventable issue that drive people to seek care. And if left untreated, ingrown nails can lead to more serious complications, especially for people with diabetes or circulation problems.

If your nails are out of sorts, it's important to talk to your health care provider. They can send a clipping of the abnormally growing toenail or fingernail to a lab for analysis.

"A lot of the times there will actually be no fungus growing in an abnormal nail; that'll lead us to look for other possible causes of what could be going on," Stringer says.

For example, it could be something associated with your gait, shoes or the way you walk.

"A lot of folks wear shoes that are a little too small for them, and that results in the toes rubbing either alongside the top of the shoe or along the side of the shoe," he says. "Over time, this creates slower growth of the nail, and that too can appear yellow."



Salon do's and don'ts

Professional manicures and pedicures can be a wonderful way to keep nails trimmed and shaped. Even if you're not a fan of nail polish, a mani-pedi can relax you and lift your spirits. But keeping a few simple do's and don'ts in mind can help ensure that you'll have a good outcome. You should make sure that:

- ◆ the foot bath is clean. Foot baths should be disinfected between customers. If the foot bath doesn't look clean, leave.
- ◆ the technician's license is plainly displayed.
- ◆ the salon is sterilizing instruments appropriately so that you're not exposed to any kind of bacteria, fungus or virus.

And don't let your cuticles be removed. "I advise against cuticle pushing," Stringer says. "The cuticle is so important in protecting the health of our nail fold, which is where our nail is growing out from."



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