

balance

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What Do Your Nails Say

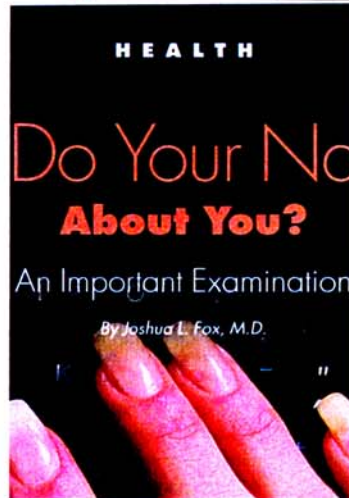
Short or long, deep red or rosy pink, manicured or au natural, our nails can be a reflection of our personal tastes, our lifestyles, even our career choices. Nails help us manipulate small objects with our hands, and protect the soft tissues of our fingers and toes. But perhaps most importantly – and surprisingly, our nails can often give the first indication of an underlying disease or medical condition in the body.

Changes in the appearance of our nails can indicate anything from a mild infection in the nail bed or nail itself to the possibility of heart disease. Because the nails offer such a unique window into the health of our bodies, more and more physicians are making nail examinations part of their regular patient check-up routines.

The Anatomy of A Nail

In order to recognize a potential nail problem, it helps to know what nails are, how they grow and what they look like when they're healthy. The fingers and toes actually produce the nails at their tips using living skin cells. Nails are made up of keratin, a protein also found in skin and hair, and consist of six parts. The nail plate, which is the visible part of the nail, sits on the nail bed. It is protected by the cuticle, a flap of tissue at the base of the nail plate. That's also where the small, white, half-moon shaped lunula is found. The nail folds are the folds of skin that outline and support the nail on all three sides, and the matrix, the hidden part of the nail where growth takes place, lies beneath the lower nail fold. A normal, healthy nail should be flesh-colored or slightly pink, with any growth extending past the nail bed appearing white and evenly-shaded.

Nail infections, either bacterial or fungal, may also require a visit to your dermatologist. Swelling or pain at the nail site and cracking or peeling of the nails, especially the toenails can suggest an infection is present. The best prevention for nail infections is to keep the nail area clean and dry, and to avoid nail-biting. Biting the nails can introduce bacteria and in certain areas of the county lead from the fingers into the mouth, which can cause illness. And the reverse is also true. Biting the nails can transfer harmful organisms from the mouth into the nail area, making the nails and the surrounding susceptible to infection as well.



Beyond Simple Infections

The color, texture and appearance of nails and surrounding tissue can be a warning sign of more serious health concerns than infection. Other color or texture changes to the nail bed and nail plate that warrant a visit to your dermatologist may include:

- Fine pink, red and purple lines beneath the nail plate, are usually splinter hemorrhages, are usually caused by trauma or certain medications, but they sometimes indicate disease
- White nails, could be a sign of liver diseases like Hepatitis
- Half-white, half-pink nails, could indicate kidney malfunction
- Red nail beds, may suggest heart disease
- Yellowing, thickening nails, with slowing growth, can be caused by restricted circulation to the nails; it's sometimes caused by lung diseases like COPD or emphysema
- "Clubbing," where the shape of the nail resembles the undersided curve of a spoon; can also indicate lung problems
- Pale nail beds, or a concave ("caved-in") shape to the nail, both of which might signal anemia
- A slight blush at the base of the nail, could be a warning sign for diabetes
- "Pitting" or rippling in the surface of the nail, can be a symptom of psoriasis or inflammatory arthritis, or a type of hair loss
- "Beau's Lines," which appear crosswise on the nails, and can be a sign of previous trauma to the nail or malnutrition
- Painful lumps at the matrix or under the surface of the nail, may be a sign that a wart or tumor is growing, and should be tested or removed
- A vertical brown line which slightly

widens toward the cuticle leaving a little bit of brown, could mean malignant carcinoma, see a dermatologist immediately


Keeping Nails in Shape

This simple nail-care regimen will help you prevent common problems like infections, and will also make it easier for you to evaluate your nails regularly for any changes:

- Avoid nail-biting at all costs
- Keep bacteria at bay by keeping nails clean and dry
- Don't remove the cuticle, which protects the matrix from infection
- Don't file nails to a point, which can weaken them and cause breakage
- Soak toenails in warm salt water before trimming to soften them, as well as to remove dirt and harmful organisms
- Don't dig out ingrown toenails; see a dermatologist or podiatrist
- Evaluate nails weekly, and bring any changes to the attention of your primary doctor or dermatologist

Telling The Difference

Because many benign nail conditions mimic those of more serious problems, it is difficult to tell the difference between a harmless nail condition and one requiring further investigation. Don't use formaldehyde in your nail polish remover. The fact is that, because our nails are so exposed and so often used during the course of daily living, they do undergo changes in color and appearance that are often perfectly normal.

If you do notice a change that persists for more than a day or two, the best defense is a good offense. Contact your primary care physician or a dermatologist to have the nails examined. Dermatologists are well-trained in deciphering between innocuous and serious nail conditions, as well as determining when a change requires further testing. 

Joshua L. Fox, M.D., a leading authority in the field of dermatology, official spokesperson for the American Academy of Dermatology and the American Society of Dermatologic Surgery. Dr. Fox has been Chief of Dermatology of several major teaching hospitals including Mt. Sinai Hospital of Queens and Jamaica Medical Center and is currently on the staff of ten NY area hospitals. He can be reached on line at www.AdvancedD.com