

The Nails don't lie

Fingernails can often help provide the first indication of an underlying disease or medical condition, says Joshua Fox, M.D., a New York City dermatologist and director of Advanced Dermatology and The Center for Laser and Cosmetic Surgery.

Changes in the appearance of the nails can indicate anything from a mild infection in the nail bed to anemia or diabetes, says Fox. "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 patient check-up routines," he adds.

Your doctor should check the color, texture and appearance of the nails and surrounding tissue. Dark lines beneath the nail may simply be the result of small blood vessels that have broken. But they may also indicate the presence of melanoma, the most serious of all skin cancers. Other color or texture changes that warrant a visit to the dermatologist include:

- **White nails**—May be a sign of a liver disease such as hepatitis.
- **Yellowing, thickening nails, with slowing growth**—May be caused by restricted circulation to the nails. It is sometimes caused by lung diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or emphysema.
- **Pale whitish nail beds**—May indicate anemia.
- **A slight blush at the base of the nail**—May be a warning for diabetes.
- **Painful lumps at the base or under the surface of the nail**—May be a sign that a wart or tumor is growing under the nail.

"It is difficult for patients to tell the difference between a harmless nail condition and one requiring further investigation," Fox says. "And 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."

Fox advises patients who notice such a change in their nails—especially if it persists for more than a day or two—to contact their primary-care physician or a dermatologist. "Dermatologists are well-trained in deciphering between innocuous and serious nail conditions, as well as determining a need for further testing."