

# Nail health

Fingernail and toenail problems may point to other health issues

by CHRYSTLE FIEDLER



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**T**hink of the imperfections on your nails as being like the rings of a tree, providing insights into your habits and health history. Normally, nails are smooth and one shade; however, if their appearance changes, it's a good idea to pay attention.

"Small abnormalities in the nails—like bumps, dents and ridges—usually aren't due to any internal cause," says Dr. Chris G. Adigun, a board-certified dermatologist, nail disorder specialist and medical director of the Dermatology & Laser Center of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. "But other changes may tell us about what is going on in the body.

### What are your nails trying to tell you?

Adigun lists some symptoms and causes to help you track the health of your nails. Here are some of the symptoms to look for, and what they *may* indicate:

- Beau's lines—a horizontal line running across the nails: malnourishment, diabetes, a zinc deficiency, peripheral vascular disease or even pneumonia.

- Brittle nail syndrome—a horizontal split (onychoschizia) or vertical split in the nails (onychorrhexis): iron deficiency, or often caused by repeatedly wetting and drying the nails, nail cosmetics, injury or skin diseases like lichen planus and psoriasis.

- Brown or black lines beneath the nail: medications, hormones, moles or melanoma.

- Clubbing (a painless increase in tissue around the ends of the fingers, or inversion of the nail): cardiovascular diseases, liver diseases, pulmonary diseases and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

- Half-white, half-pink nails (Lindsay's nails): chronic kidney disease or failure.

- Irregular red lines at the base of the nail fold could mean: connective tissue disease or lupus.

- Koilonychia or spooning (nails have raised ridges and scoop outward): anemia, heart disease, lupus or hypothyroidism.

- Mees' lines (transverse white lines): arsenic poisoning.

- Onycholysis (the nail plate separates from the nail bed, which causes the nail to turn white): psoriasis, infection, trauma or thyroid disease.



FROM LEFT: © VALDIA VITALY; ALEXANDER RATHS / STOCK.ADOBE.COM



**Left to right:** A physical examination of your nails can help determine other aspects of your health; tea tree oil may be helpful with fungal infections of the nails.



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## If your nails get infected

If you have an artificial, gel, acrylic or dip manicure or any kind of long-wearing manicure, says board-certified dermatologist Dr. Chris G. Adigun, check under the nails routinely for discoloration. It can be a sign of infection.

Treat fungal infections naturally by using tea tree essential oil or oil of oregano. "It's important to get either oil under the nail bed that's affected," says Dr. Dana Cohen, an integrative physician.

"Be consistent and methodical and do it each day," Cohen continues. "Be patient: It can take several months to show results."

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- Red nail beds: heart disease.
- White nail beds (Terry's nails): cirrhosis or chronic liver disease, hepatitis, congestive heart failure or diabetes.
- Yellow nail syndrome (YNS): emphysema, pulmonary effusion or bronchiectasis. More often caused by staining from polish.
- Yellowish nails with a slight blush at the base: diabetes.

### When in doubt, see your doctor

Because your nails provide a window into the state of your health, "it's always a smart idea to take your nail polish off when you see your doctor," says Dr. Dana Cohen, an integrative physician. "A good doctor will look at your nails as part of the exam, because she knows that it can be a physical manifestation of illness."

If you've had a condition like dry nails your entire life, it probably isn't an issue. But if it's something new, discuss it with a trusted health practitioner who can alleviate your concerns or, if necessary, treat it.

"Always begin with your primary care doctor, who is trained to tell the difference between innocuous and serious nail and health conditions," says Cohen. "She can take a complete history and order blood tests to find the answers you seek." ■

Chrystle Fiedler is a writer and author who specializes in health and wellness topics.

## Nail down this routine

Experts recommend the following tips for optimal nail health. Make them part of your regular routine:

- Keep your nails clean and dry.
- Avoid nail-biting or picking.
- Go bare if you can. "It's by far the healthier way to do it," says Dr. Dana Cohen. After removing polish, "replenish the moisture in your nails by rubbing food-grade coconut oil onto them and the cuticles too."
- File your nails in one direction and round the tip slightly, not to a point.
- Don't remove or push the cuticles

or clean too deeply under your nails, says Dr. Chris G. Adigun. "It can lead to infection."

• Don't dig out ingrown toenails. See a dermatologist if they become bothersome.—CF