

## BEAUTY THROUGH HEALTH

# Healthier body: healthier hair, nails

By JACKIE LUPO

Ah, how we abuse the body parts we try to make the most beautiful: our hair and nails. We use our fingernails to pry open soda cans; we fry our hair with 450-degree irons and cook it with chemicals.

It's possible to have nails and hair that look beautiful without wreaking havoc instead. We talked to local experts about the problems that can befall nails and hair. These include natural ones — caused by health issues, for example — and problems that can only be called owner-inflicted ones.

### Healthy, beautiful nails

Nails are made up of layers of a protein called keratin. The growth starts from an area below the cuticle. As the nail grows beyond the cuticle area, the cells get compacted and harder. But there are a lot of things that can happen both during the process of formation of the nail, and after the nail emerges from the cuticle.

In fact, a doctor may be able to tell by looking at your hands that something is wrong somewhere else in your body. The Mayo Clinic describes several nail problems often found in people with serious health issues:

- Pitting on the surface of the nails may exist along with other skin problems, such as psoriasis or some forms of chronic dermatitis.

- Nails that curve around the fingertips, a condition called "clubbing," may be a sign of low blood oxygen levels, found in such conditions as lung disease. Nail clubbing may also occur with cardiovascular, bowel or liver conditions.

- Nails with the opposite appearance, sunken in like spoons, may develop in people with iron deficiency anemia.

- Dark bands near the nail tips may be a normal sign of aging. They are also sometimes seen in patients with congestive heart failure, diabetes, liver disease or malnutrition.

- Sometimes, severe illness can temporarily affect the formation of the nail, causing horizontal ridges. These ridges, called "Beau's lines," may form in patients with malnutrition, uncontrolled diabetes, circulatory disorders, or diseases such as pneumonia, mumps, measles or scarlet fever, in which the patient has suffered from a high fever.

- A fingernail may loosen and fall off due to injury or infection, but there are other reasons that nails can become detached from the nail bed. This condition can sometimes be caused by acrylic nails or as a reaction to nail hardeners. Nails can also loosen due to drug reactions, thyroid disease or psoriasis.

- Discoloration of the nails may indicate a health problem. For example, sometimes people with respiratory problems, such as chronic bronchitis,



may notice a yellowing of the nails.

Some irregularities in the nail are normal. For example, vertical ridges are no cause for concern, although they do tend to become more pronounced with age.

Some people have nails that are inherently strong or weak. But the way you use your hands can also affect whether nails have a tendency to split or break. Exposing nails to water while dishwashing or bathing can contribute to splitting. Harsh chemicals, such as cleaning products or overuse of polish remover, can also weaken nails. Use a

toluene-free or formaldehyde-free polish remover.

A rough-edged nail can easily turn into a split one. Keep the edges of nails smoothly filed in a gentle arc, without sharp points or corners that can catch on things and cause them to split or break. If you see the beginning of a split, apply a thin dab of nail glue to the area. Keeping nails covered with clear polish can also protect them from splitting.

According to Debbie Palmer, D.O., a dermatologist in Harrison, and author of "The Dermatologist's Prescription for a New You" (Authorhouse, 2011),

it's easy to damage even healthy nails. "Nail damage can occur from using the nails as tools to pick or pry things like pop-top cans," said Dr. Palmer. "Instead, use an instrument."

She also urges people not to bite their nails or tear their cuticles. While it's OK to trim a cuticle that's sticking up so it doesn't tear, gnawing and picking are no-nos: "You can get infections in the cuts that can permanently affect how your nail grows."

Treatments at the nail salon may make nails look strong and healthy, but hazards may lurk at salons that don't

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properly sterilize their instruments. Palmer suggests bringing your own instruments to the salon if you're not absolutely sure how the salon handles theirs. And, adds Palmer, don't overlook the hygiene of your own tools: keep them clean at home by boiling them in water for 20 minutes.

If your manicures consist mostly of cuticle care, nail shaping and polishing, hazards are minimal as long as everything that's used is clean. If, however, you choose to get acrylic nails, extensions, UV gel nails — any treatment that essentially involves sticking a new nail onto your natural nail — be aware that the condition of your own nails may weaken over time.

If acrylics, gels, wraps or extensions loosen up or get pulled off, they can take the top layer of your natural nail along with them. And if the material on the nails loosens up, it needs to be removed to prevent infection.

"Once water gets under long extensions, that's when fungus grows," said Charles Anthony, owner of Salon Perri in Pound Ridge. He notes that there are now shellac-type nail polishes that dry to a hard finish under ultraviolet light, and these treatments should be gentler to nails than the old gels or wraps. But when it's time to remove UV polish, it should be soaked off for enough time to let the polish push easily off the nail. This can take a half hour or more, depending on how many coats of polish were used. Rushing it can result in a layer of your own nail being removed as well, since it's hard for the operator to tell where the polish ends and your natural nail begins.

"Don't let them push it off with a metal pusher," Anthony said. Any of the removal techniques associated with the old-style acrylics, wraps or gels, such as filing the surface of the nail, pushing with hard tools, or lifting off the polish in one piece, can all result in natural nail thinning.

## Hair health how-tos

"Your scalp has 100,000 hair follicles," said Palmer, adding that "a human hair can be stretched up to 30 percent of its length when wet." Hair really is an amazing substance. It's strong, but, like the nails, hair can be sensitive to what is going on inside the body.

Hair has a growing period, or "anagen" phase, of about five years. At any given time, about 90 percent of the hairs on the head are in this phase. Then they fall out and enter the resting, or "telogen," phase, which lasts a few months. Obviously, not all the hairs are in the anagen or telogen phase at the same



time, or we would have periods of extreme hairiness followed by periods of extreme baldness.

Male pattern baldness caused by normal aging is not a cause for concern, at least from a medical standpoint. The progress of this type of baldness can sometimes be slowed down by using a product such as Rogaine, but once a person stops using it, the inevitable march toward baldness resumes.

Occasionally, however, health problems, such as malnutrition, some diseases, or a drop in normal hormone levels, can interrupt the normal cycle of hair growth and resting. This is a condition called "stress alopecia" — a few months after some health-related stressor affects the follicles, hair starts to fall out. That's why pregnant women often see a spike in hair growth during pregnancy, when hormone levels are high, followed by a greater than normal amount of hair loss a few months after the levels drop. Chemotherapy can cause hair loss as well. The good news is that when health problems, hormone fluctuations or chemotherapy stop, the hair growth rhythm generally returns to normal because the follicles themselves are still in good condition.

"Traction alopecia" is another story. This occurs when the hair is pulled so tightly, from wearing tight braids, extensions or a ponytail, that the hair falls out, something that is especially noticeable around the temples. If the hair is continually being pulled for a long period of time, the follicles can become damaged and the hair loss may be permanent.

A third kind of abnormal hair loss is called "alopecia areata," in which hair falls

out in coin-shaped patches. This condition is thought to be an autoimmune reaction, but it usually reverses itself because the hair follicles themselves can survive through this type of hair loss.

"There's no magic diet to grow hair, but if you have poor nutrition your body suffers," said Palmer. "It's recommended to eat a well-balanced diet daily, with foods from all five of the food groups." Palmer added that "if you have a poor amount of protein in your body, you won't grow hair as well."

If you're not sure you are getting all the nutrients you need for healthy hair, a good multivitamin may help. But there's no dietary supplement that has been proven to grow hair faster or more lushly, although there are plenty of products out there that make such claims.

Of course, what may seem to be slow hair growth may actually be hair breakage at the ends, making it appear that hair is not growing at the typical rate of a half inch every month. If you've taken care of all the health issues that can be affecting your hair from the inside, it's time to look at what damage you may be doing to the hair that's already on your head. The three major ways to damage existing hair are thermal, chemical and mechanical.

Mechanical damage is, simply put, rough treatment that breaks the hair shaft. "Hair is more prone to breaking when wet," Palmer said. That's why she recommends not going to bed with wet hair; the friction against the pillow can cause breakage. Other potential hair breakers: rubber bands, ponytail holders with metal, barrettes with mechanisms that

can catch the hair.

It's easy to damage the hair's cuticle, the coating of microscopic scales that makes up the covering of each hair. Chemical damage can occur when hair is overprocessed by coloring or straightening. Some forms of straightening, and all permanent hair coloring, work by applying harsh chemicals that open the cuticle to deposit product within the hair shaft. Permanent coloring products also lift the natural pigment from the hair in the process of depositing color. Once the hair's cuticle has been opened by chemicals, it's never as strong again.

"If you get color, get it applied by a trained colorist who won't overlap color onto color-treated hair," said salon owner Anthony. "Overlapping the color can cause it to be too processed. A trained eye is needed to see if there is something happening to your hair. We can recommend good products to help externally."

Julius Michael, owner of Julius Michael Scarsdale, recommends using a low-ammonia color.

"Too much ammonia and peroxide are damaging to hair," he said. Instead, he recommends a semi-permanent color because it "washes off the hair. I try to get all my clients to use it. There's no oxidation or brassiness." For the most part, semi-permanent color is gentler because it deposits the color on the outside of the hair rather than opening up the cuticle of the hair to deposit color inside. People who need to touch up new growth, since this color washes out after a few weeks, probably need to return to the salon in about a month anyway. This kind of color causes less damage and brassiness because it just coats the hair instead of lifting the natural color.

Thermal damage can come from misuse or overuse of straightening or curling tools. "People come in with hair fried from irons," Michael added. "They use the wrong heat setting and do it in slow motion." The right way to flat iron? Keep the iron moving quickly through the hair.

Stylists recommend using a protective product made specifically for heat styling before using a flat iron or a curling iron. Moroccan-style hair oil products are great for adding a bit of gloss to hair that has already been heat-styled, but they should not be used before ironing hair, since the oil, combined with extreme heat, can "fry" the hair.

While there are at-home chemical straightening kits available, Michael doesn't recommend doing any straightening at home. "The first time you do it, it might look good, but the second time it overlaps, and that's when the damage is done."