

7 Things Your Nails Say About You

No, your nails aren't just a canvas for pretty polish. Find out what serious problems might be hiding under your mani-pedi

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Your body has a knack for letting you know when something has gone awry, and your nails are no exception. Their shape, texture, color, and overall condition can clue you in on what's happening with your health. Here are 7 things—from "Skip the salon this week" to "Go see your doctor, stat!"—that your nails are trying to tell you:

1. Weak, Brittle, or Splitting

What it looks like: You can break or bend your nails easily, peel them, or they constantly split.

What it means: Brittle nails can be related to advancing age, or a sign that they've been over processed due to harsh manicures, acrylic nails, or gel wraps. You may also be deficient in vitamin A (which helps your body process protein and is a key ingredient in your nails), vitamin C, or biotin, which is a B vitamin that can help strengthen nails and speed their growth.

What to do about it: "Take a break! Give your nails time to breathe," suggests **Rebecca Baxt, MD, a board-certified dermatologist in New York.** Lay off the salon for a few weeks, and if you're a frequent washer, be sure to replenish the moisture in your hands with a rich nail conditioner. If that doesn't help, it's time to take a trip to the dermatologist to see if a vitamin deficiency is at play.



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2. Yellow Nails

What it looks like: As the name suggests, your nails will have a subtle or dramatic yellow tinge.

What it means: It could be a number of things, such as nail fungus, psoriasis, or stains from smoking. On a lighter note, your affection for dark nail polish could also be to blame.

What to do about it: If your nails are stained, a soak in denture cleaner (really) will remove the stain. If the yellowing persists, gets worse, or is accompanied by pain, it could be a fungal infection. You wouldn't be alone—roughly 50% of all nail discoloration is caused by fungus. Unfortunately, fungal infections can be tricky to conquer, especially if it's been ignored. Yellowing is also seen in psoriasis patients, as a side effect of certain medications, and a result of a rare condition called yellow nails syndrome. If you notice a change in your nails, see your doctor.

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3. White Dots

What it looks like: Small white dots that appear to be on the surface, but when you try to buff them away, they won't budge.

What it means: White dots on the nails are usually due to some type of trauma—even something as simple as a banged finger or a too-aggressive cuticle trim.

What to do about it: Give them some time to grow out and fade. "But if they aren't going away, see your dermatologist," says **Baxt**. "It could be a fungal infection."

4. Dark Vertical Bands

What it looks like: Dark lines of color running top to bottom, possibly darker at the base of your nail.

What it means: "Pigmented vertical bands are common in dark-skinned people," says **Baxt**, "and they can also be benign moles in the nail bed." However, a single new or changing band can be a malignant melanoma—a potentially deadly skin cancer.

What to do about it: If the bands continue to change or darken, see a dermatologist immediately.



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5. Spoon Nails

What it looks like: Nails will look scooped out. An easy test: squeeze one or two drops of water from an eye dropper on the center of your nail. If the water sits on top rather than sliding off, it's spoon nails.

What it means: "Spoon nails signify a deficiency in iron," says Kyle Coleman, MD of Westlake Dermatology and Cosmetic Surgery. When you have spoon nails, the blood supply doesn't reach the middle of your nail to make it grow. In some cases, spoon nails can be a sign of heart disease or hypothyroidism, a condition marked by an underactive thyroid gland.

What to do about it: You need to see your doctor and get the appropriate blood work done to figure out what kind of deficiency is behind it. In some cases, iron supplements may be prescribed. If your thyroid is out of wack, your endocrinologist will work with you to get it sorted out.

6. Horizontal Depressions

What it looks like: Deep depressions that run across the nail bed.

What it means: Slammed your finger in a car door? If you've had a similar recent trauma to your nail, that's the easy answer. But if you've managed to keep your digits clear of injury, these depressions—called Beau's lines—could be a sign of something more serious: most commonly uncontrolled diabetes, circulatory diseases, or any illness associated with a high fever (like pneumonia or mumps).

What to do about it: If you haven't experienced any nail trauma but have Beau's lines, see your doctor sooner rather than later.

7. Nail Beading

What it looks like: Vertical beaded ridges resembling a candle's wax drippings.

What it means: Probably hormonal changes, thyroid issues, stress, or diabetes.

What to do about it: Talk to your doctor about any other symptoms (as well as the the nail beading) to determine the right diagnosis. If you're concerned with the beading cosmetically, use a medium-grit buffer to smooth the ridges pre-manicure.