

# Fingernails: Keep them healthy and strong

By [Mayo Clinic staff](#)

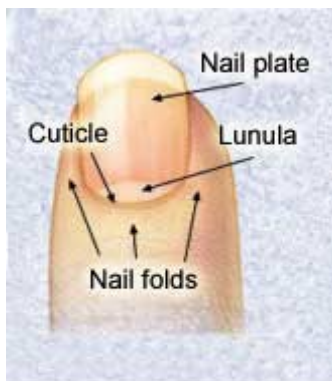
## Anatomy of a fingernail

You may not realize it, but your fingernails reveal a lot about your general health. Take a look. Are your nails strong and healthy looking? Or do you see ridges or areas of unusual color or shape? Many less-than-desirable nail conditions can be avoided through proper care, but some actually indicate an illness that requires attention.

Whether you see your nails as decorative or functional, here's what you need to know to keep them in tiptop shape.

Your nails are made up of layers of keratin — a protein that's also found in your hair and skin. Each nail is comprised of several parts, including:

- **Nail plate.** The nail plate is the part of your nail that's most visible — what you see when you look at your fingernails.
- **Nail folds.** This is the skin that frames each of your nails on three sides.
- **Nail bed.** Your nail bed is the skin beneath the nail plate.
- **Cuticle.** Your cuticle is the tissue that overlaps your nail plate at the base of your nail.
- **Lunula.** The lunula is the whitish, half-moon shape at the base of your nail.



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Your nails grow from the area under your cuticle (matrix). As new cells grow, older cells become hard and compacted and are eventually pushed out toward your fingertips. Nails grow at an average of one-tenth of an inch a month. The nails grow faster on your dominant hand, and they grow more in summer than in winter. Nails are also permeable, which means they let in liquids that come in contact with them.

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## Proper nail care

To keep your nails healthy and looking their best, treat them gently and moisturize them regularly.

- **Protect your nails.** Wear cotton-lined rubber gloves when using soap and water for prolonged periods or when using harsh chemicals. Gloves help protect your nails when washing dishes, for example.
- **Avoid abusing your nails.** Don't use them as tools to pick, poke or pry things.
- **Don't bite your nails or pick at your cuticles.** These types of habits can damage the nail bed. Even a minor cut alongside your nail can allow bacteria or fungi to enter and cause an infection (paronychia). Because your nails grow slowly, an injured nail retains signs of an injury for several months.
- **Moisturize your nails frequently.** When you're moisturizing your hands, rub the lotion into your nails as well.

If you rely on manicures to make your nails look good, keep a few things in mind. Don't have your cuticle removed — it can lead to nail infection. Also, check to be sure that your nail technician properly sterilizes all tools used during your manicure. Using unsterilized tools may transmit viral infections, such as hepatitis B or warts.

## Reading the signs

Your fingernails hold clues to your health. Learn to recognize the signs that might indicate a health issue. But know that some nail conditions are harmless. These include vertical ridges, which tend to worsen as you get older, and white lines or spots. Spots usually result from injury to the nail plate or nail bed. In time, they'll grow out.

Other nail conditions can indicate disease. Remove your nail polish before you see your doctor — he or she may check your nails for signs of an underlying condition.

### Yellow nail syndrome

Yellow or green discoloration in your fingernails may result from a respiratory condition, such as chronic bronchitis, or from swelling of your hands (lymphedema). In yellow nail syndrome, nails thicken and new growth slows. Nails affected with this condition may lack a cuticle and may detach from the nail bed in places.

The discoloration occurs because of the slow growth of your nails. Although this condition is often a sign of respiratory disease, it's possible to have yellow or green nails and not have a respiratory condition. Yellow or green nails may also result from any condition that causes the growth of your nails to slow down

### Pitting

Small depressions in the nails are common in people with psoriasis — a skin condition that produces scaly patches — or nail injuries. Pitting may cause your nails to crumble.

Pitting is also associated with conditions that can damage your nail's cuticle, such as chronic dermatitis of your fingers or alopecia areata.

### Clubbing

Clubbing occurs when the tips of your fingers enlarge and your nails curve around your fingertips. This condition results from low oxygen levels in your blood and could be a sign of lung disease.

### **Spoon nails**

Spoon nails (koilonychia) are soft nails that look scooped out. The depression usually is large enough to hold a drop of liquid. Spoon nails may be a sign of iron deficiency anemia.

### **Terry's nails**

With the condition known as Terry's nails, your nails look opaque, but the tip has a dark band. Sometimes this can be attributed to aging. In other cases, it can be a sign of serious illness, such as:

- Cancer
- Congestive heart failure
- Diabetes
- Liver disease

### **Beau's lines**

Beau's lines are indentations that run across your nails. They can appear when growth at the area under your cuticle is interrupted by injury or severe illness, such as a heart attack. Beau's lines may also be a sign of malnutrition.

Nail separates from nail bed

With a condition known as onycholysis, your fingernails become loose and can separate from the nail bed. If your nails show signs of detaching, this may be associated with:

- Injury
- Thyroid disease
- Fungal disease
- Drug reactions
- Reactions to nail hardeners or acrylic nails
- Psoriasis