

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore

-



Next

Your eyes may offer a glimpse of your soul—but for a view of your internal organs, check your fingers and toes instead.

“Your nails can tell a tremendous amount of information about your general health,” says Dana Stern, M.D., a dermatologist and nail specialist in New York City. “Certain nail changes can indicate issues with the kidneys, infections of the heart, anemia, lung disease, and even exposure to certain poisons.”

That’s because diseases that affect your whole body can change the blood flow, growth patterns, or shape of your fingernails and toenails in ways you may notice long before any other symptoms, says Chris Adigun, M.D., a board certified dermatologist and nail specialist in Chapel Hill, N.C.

So if you spy something new or unusual on the ends of your digits, check in with your primary care doctor or a dermatologist, she advises. Treating the underlying condition often can save your nails—and maybe even your life.

Advertisement

Daily Dose

You may unsubscribe at any time.

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 1. Koilonychia or “spoon nails”

[PrevNext](#)

You could hold a drop of liquid inside these nails' concave shape, says Al D'Angelantonio III, D.P.M., who sees and treats toenail problems as a foot and ankle surgeon at Penn Medicine. Spoon nails can serve as a red flag for iron-deficiency anemia, low blood oxygen levels from not taking in or absorbing enough iron. Other signs include fatigue and hair loss.

Iron deficiency in men can signal some kind of gastrointestinal bleeding, so a workup may be necessary. According to a 2013 study from Israel, 62 percent of guys under 40 with iron deficiency anemia were found to have significant GI lesions like stomach ulcers, hemorrhoids, or inflammatory bowel disease.

(But if you donate blood regularly, this might be [The Supplement You Need to Boost Recovery](#).)

Spoon nails can also occur in people with heart disease, thyroid problems, or the autoimmune disease lupus.

Image by [coreyheitzmd](#) from [Flickr](#)

Advertisement

Daily Dose

You may unsubscribe at any time.

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 2. Clubbed nails

The opposite of spoon nails, clubbed nails curve outward and bubble up, Dr. D'Angelantonio says. Some people are born with them, but if they develop later on in life, have them checked out promptly—about 8 out of 10 times, they're due to underlying lung disease like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or a type of scarring called pulmonary fibrosis, Dr. Adigun says.

(Help yourself breathe better with the [Diet You Need for Healthy Lungs](#).)

Doctors aren't sure how the two are linked, but suspect that low blood oxygen levels change the shape of the fingertip, affecting the way the nail grows. Other possible causes include heart disease, inflammatory bowel disease, and even HIV/AIDS, Dr. D'Angelantonio says.

Image by Desherinka via Wikipedia

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 3. Splinter hemorrhages

Sometimes you'll see these long, black, splinter-like lines after you smash your hand in the door or stub your toe. But if you haven't hurt yourself lately, they could mean you have bacterial endocarditis, an infection of the valves and inner lining of the heart, Dr. Stern says. The condition often occurs after a dental or medical procedure and requires antibiotics.

Image by Splarka via Wikipedia

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 4. Pitting

Small depressions—almost like a tiny climber took an icepick to your nails—serve as signs of the chronic skin disease psoriasis. This condition also produces silvery or red scaly, itchy patches on your elbows, knees, and other parts of your body.

Treatment may include creams, medicine, and light therapy, and it's essential—people whose psoriasis shows up in their nails have a greater risk of more serious health consequences, including a painful joint inflammation called psoriatic arthritis, Dr. Adigun says.

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 5. Warts

Biting your nails or chewing your fingers leaves you prone to these small, rough growths, which sometimes have tiny black dots in them. Gnawed-up skin provides easy access to the viruses that cause them—herpes or human papillomavirus (HPV). The bugs can then spread to your lips and mouth, leading to cold sores and even oral cancer, Dr. Adigun says.

(Find out how [Your Age Can Make You More Vulnerable to HPV](#) .)

Don't try to zap warts on the tips of your fingers and toes yourself, she advises. Our body creates a zone of "immune privilege" in these areas, ramping down the immune response so its disease-fighting defenses don't destroy the dead cells that make up your nails.

This makes it harder for infection-fighting treatments to work in this area, so over-the-counter options or home remedies like duct tape aren't strong enough. Instead, see a dermatologist for treatment and to check for squamous cell carcinoma, or HPV-associated skin cancer in your fingertips.

Image from Corbis Images

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 6. Beau's lines

Ridges or grooves can form across all your nails when an outside stressor—such as a severe illness or even psychological trauma from a death or divorce—causes the so-called matrix cells, which produce new nail material, to temporarily stop working. “These lines usually become apparent about 3 to 6 months after the event,” Dr. Adigun says, as your nails begin to grow again.

They're not harmful and will grow out as your nails do. Still, you should have them evaluated, because uncontrolled diabetes or circulation problems can also produce this halt in growth, Dr. D'Angelantonio says.

Image by Elipongo via Wikipedia

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 7. Onycholysis

In this condition, your nail lifts off from the nail bed or skin underneath. As with most other nail issues, this can happen when you hurt your finger or toe. But if there's no apparent cause, your doctor will probably check your blood for hormones that indicate you have an overactive thyroid gland, a common cause of this symptom, Dr. Stern says.

Treatment with medications or surgery can bring your nails back into balance, though your nails may never return to normal, Dr. D'Angelantonio says.

Image by CopperKettle via Wikipedia

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 8. Fungal nail infections

Most people assume any problem with their nails is due to fungus—and if yours are thick, yellow or green, brittle, or broken, this might be the case. The only way to know for sure? Visit a dermatologist for a biopsy. He or she can then offer advice about home treatment, including filing your nails frequently and applying antifungal medications.

Though fungal infections usually don't spread to your bloodstream, they can serve as a sign of another disease. For instance, high blood sugar from uncontrolled diabetes makes the damp, moist environment in your shoes and socks an even more hospitable environment for an infestation, Dr. D'Angelantonio says.

(Are you giving yourself diabetes? Find out the [Surprising Habits that Raise Your Diabetes Risk](#).)

Image by James Heilman, MD via Wikipedia

9 Nail Problems You Shouldn't Ignore



- 9. White spots

Try this test: If a portion of your nails appears white, push on it. If the white spot doesn't fade, you may have what's called true leuconychia (pictured), a white discoloration usually due to an injury to the nail or an infection (or in rare cases, arsenic poisoning), [Dr. Adigun says](#). Check with a doc to see if you need treatment for the infection.

If, however, the spot does fade, it's more likely to be a sign of a bigger health problem. Different shapes of white spots point to different underlying issues. For instance, "Terry's lines"—where almost the whole nail is white except for a red strip at the end—often point to liver problems. Your doctor will likely test your blood for hypoalbuminuria, or low levels of the protein albumin in the blood that occur when your liver isn't working properly, [Dr. Adigun says](#). Meanwhile, half-white, half-red nails are called "Lindsay's nails" and can signal kidney disease.

Image by Londonsista via Wikipedia