

Gel Manicures: Are the Lights Safe?



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UVA-emitting nail dryer

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If you have ever had a gel manicure, more than likely you never want a traditional manicure ever again. Gels (also known as “Shellac” and other names) are a durable, high-shine manicure that last at least 2 weeks—without a chip—and take about the same amount of time to apply as regular polish. Gel manicures are an option for anyone—young or old—and have the added benefit of disguising imperfections in the shape or surface of nails. So...what’s the catch?

Gel manicures have one controversial step in their application, which is that

the nails need to be exposed to a UVA-emitting nail lamp to properly cure the product, affixing it to the nail. This crucial step is precisely what gives this type of manicure its shine and durability, but it is the step that gives dermatologists pause. Unfortunately, there is no way around this step. All gel manicures require UVA radiation.

There have been several investigative reports that have attempted to quantify this risk for gel manicure consumers. These investigators face many challenges, such as the tremendous variability in the intensity among different manufacturers’ nail lamps and the wide variability in exposure times nail technicians choose for their customers. Even so-called “LED” nail lamps emit UVA radiation—in fact, they emit it in higher intensity than regular UV nail lamps, and several times higher than natural sunlight!

Several well-designed studies evaluating all nail lamps have found that the UVA exposure from these lamps is far from insignificant: the threshold to reach DNA damage in the skin can be reached in as few as 11.8 manicures. Many patients often ask me the difference between UVA and UVB rays, and assume that UVB rays are more dangerous as they are largely responsible for sunburns. However, UVA rays penetrate the skin to a deeper depth and are responsible for many of the changes in the skin known as photoaging: thinning and wrinkling, brown spots, and visible blood vessels. And, of course, these rays are responsible for causing skin cancer.

Make no mistake—I love gel manicures! They are an excellent product. I actually recommend gel manicures to many of my patients with certain types of nail conditions. What I propose to consumers is that they use a thoroughly UVA and UVB protective sleeve, such as the YouVeeShield, that they can bring with them to the nail salon, or—ideally—that nail salons provide for their consumers. Keep in mind that applying sunscreen is insufficient, as many sunscreens need to be applied to the skin for 20 minutes before they are effective, and most do not have sufficient UVA protection. But with the proper protection, everyone wins: gel manicure consumers still receive and enjoy an excellent product while their skin is appropriately protected from the potentially harmful UVA rays.

Neighbor to Neighbor

Dr. Chris G. Adigun and her team offer a comprehensive dermatology practice that delivers the highest quality care through careful patient evaluation and personalized treatment.



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