

Gel Manicures: What to Know Before You Get One

By **Emily Gaynor**, www.teenvogue.com

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There's nothing worse than leaving the nail salon only to put a dent in your freshly painted pointers the minute you dig through your handbag to check your phone. That was one of the reasons gel manicures became an instant beauty phenomenon: They're quick, they're practically bulletproof, and the shiny, glossy color won't budge for at least two weeks.

A lot of naysayers insisted that this quick polish fix seemed too good to be true. And even though we were devout followers at first, it's beginning to look like they might be right. We spoke with celebrity manicurist Jenna Hipp (Lea Michele, Miley, and Selena all are fans!) and Dr. Chris Adigun, a Chapel Hill-based dermatologist who specializes in nail health, to learn why you might want step away from the light.

Manicures can weaken your nails

Well, for one thing, your routine trip to the nail salon to get freshly coated color — gel or not — is weakening your nails. "The manicure process can lead to dehydration and thinning of the nail plate," says Dr. Adigun. "I've seen my clients come in with peeling, thin, breaking, discolored nails and even painful nail beds," explains Hipp.

But that fact is likely to deter salon regulars, or even at-home manicurists, who are never seen without a color adorning their fingers. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Adigun, by not looking at your natural nail at least every two weeks you won't be able to properly assess its condition, plus you might even be missing infections and (more scarily) tumors. The thick, armor-like coating of polish also blocks nails from being able to transfer oxygen, explains Hipp.

Picking at the gel manicure is a bad idea

One thing that's pretty common among gel devotees is the picking process. When the color begins to lift, you may be tempted to remove it, almost like you would a scab. "As peeling and lifting begin, water can seep into the nail," says Hipp. "This can harbor bacteria and possibly cause fungus. Once the peeling phase starts, it's hard not to pick at your polish. If you rip it off, you're probably taking some layers of your nail off with it. This kind of damage can take over six months to repair." Dr. Adigun adds: "In one study, nail plate

thickness was measured both before and after just *one* gel manicure and thinning was observed." It's not clear exactly which component caused the thinning, but one or more points in the gel process are to blame.

Look out for the "toxic trio" in gel manicure formulas

"More than just nail health, I opt for total body health. Many of us know about the 'Toxic Trio,' or carcinogens in nail polish which can also sometimes be found in a gel formula," says Hipp. Her own brand of lacquers, along with Jin Soon's, RGB's, Zoya's, and Sally Hansen's come formulated without those common culprits.

Try to limit your exposure to the gel manicure light

Although the jury is still out on whether or not UV light radiation from gel manicures can cause cancer, it's best to stay away as much as you can. While some experts say that gel manicure UV lights raise risk of cancer, "others point out the risk is slim," explains Hipp.

Gel manicure UV lamps are not all alike

Dr. Adigun notes that UV lamps are not regulated, so each one might affect you differently. "The strength of the bulb varies from one manufacturer to the next, which makes it very difficult to assess the risk level at different salons," she says. You might be telling yourself that the amount of exposure is so short and infrequent, but your visits to the manicurist add up.

But we *do* know one thing that can be caused by UV exposure from gel manicures

As of right now, gel manicures are a fairly new service, even if they are the most ubiquitous nail trend since the dawn of nail art. But the good news is, the more people that get them, the more studies will be conducted to research the long-term effects. One negative side effect from the UV lamps that has been proven is premature aging. "With extended use, dark spots have been reported on the backs of hands," says Hipp. As skin is exposed to the light, you up your chances for wrinkling of the hands and fingers. Who wants that?! Make sure to bring your own broad spectrum hand cream, like La Prairie's, with you to the salon and be adamant with your manicurist about checking in on your progress frequently.

The soaking-off process is harmful

While your manicure may stay firmly in place until you're ready to take it off, the removal can be extremely harsh. According to Hipp, "soaking hands in straight acetone wrapped in foil for 15-20 minutes is toxic." Dr. Adigun says that it's proven that the longer and more frequently you expose your nails to acetone, the more dehydrated they will become. While your nails are getting the brunt of the damage, there's also the chance that acetone will enter your bloodstream.

Not to mention, once the foils come off, manicurists scrape the nail plate which often requires extra buffing, meaning more nail trauma!

Give your nails (and fingers!) some TLC after the gel manicure is removed

"It's very important that the surrounding skin and cuticle, as well as the nail plate itself, be rehydrated with a thick emollient such as Aquaphor after the soak in order to rehydrate and repair the skin, cuticle, and nails," Dr. Adigun says.

Don't get gel manicures back-to-back

Whatever you do, don't do back-to-back gel appointments! "I always tell my patients to go on a gel honeymoon," says Dr. Adigun. "This break will allow their nails to rehydrate and repair."

HYDRATE!

Also, hydrate your nails as much as possible in between salon visits. Dermelect Makeover Ridge Filler acts as a base coat and quenches shriveled nail beds.

Consider a wrap...

Hipp loves a combination of fun NCLA nail strips topped with a clear gel coat, like Dior's. "This way, the gel never touches the actual nail plate, and it seals in the wrap for up to two weeks," she says.

...or "gel-like" polishes

There's also a series of "gel-like" polishes available on the market, which have long-wear properties that, generally speaking, will last a full week. Nails Inc.'s gel collection has earned the brand a considerable amount of notoriety, and Covergirl's XL Nail Gel also offers a considerable amount of shine.

Rounding out the at-home game is Sally Hansen, who just came out with a revolutionary no-lights-necessary gel system called Miracle Gel. The part-gel, part-lacquer product lasts for two weeks (seriously). Just paint on the nail color and seal with the special topcoat—natural light bonds the two layers together and strengthens over time. The best part? No acetone baths at the end. Simply remove with regular nail polish remover. The future of the fool-proof manicure is here!