

Three Major Risks of Gel Manicures and How to Prevent Them

by CHRISTINA HEISER | Last Updated: Aug 16, 2017

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Getting a manicure used to be hit or miss. Think about how many times you've walked out of the nail salon and then notice chips in your polish a day later. That all changed with the introduction of gel manicures, which typically last a full two weeks. Gel manicures differ from regular manicures because they use a special gel polish that hardens or "cures" under a UV light, creating a high-shine finish that resists chipping.

Gel manicures aren't without risks, but that doesn't mean you should skip them altogether. After all, who wants to worry about fixing up their polish while they're on vacation? Keep reading to learn how to keep your nails healthy and strong during the application and removal process.

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GEL MANICURE BENEFITS

“Gels are awesome as far as durability is concerned,” says Adigun. “Gel manicures give you a really nice, uniform look that masks structural imperfections as well high shine, which you can really only get from gels.” Plus, gel manicures can be a good option for those with disfiguring nail conditions, such as psoriasis or trauma from burns. “Our hands are part of our presentation,” says Adigun. “Gel manicures are really life-changing for many of my patients.”



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RISK 1: WEAKENED NAILS

“Gels are not bad for nails,” says Dasha Minina, a licensed nail technician and owner of Maxus Nails. “What is bad is a nail technician who doesn’t know what they’re doing.” A technician shouldn’t use an electric file to rough up nails before gel application, says Minina. This removes layers of your nails and causes weakness and breakage.

Polish must also be cured with the appropriate lamp for the correct amount of time, says Chris Adigun, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist and nail specialist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Not following instructions can make removal difficult, which can hurt your nails.

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FIX 1: CHECK YOUR TECHNICIAN'S LICENSE

Unlike regular polish, gels must be cured by either an LED or UV light lamp; a nail technician applies a base coat, color and top coat, curing each layer under the lamp after application. These take practice to use correctly, so make sure your technician is licensed. By law, they should have their photo and license displayed: "If you don't see their face, odds are they aren't licensed," Minina says.



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RISK 2: SUN DAMAGE FROM UV EXPOSURE

Whether or not the lamp being used to cure your gel manicure is UV or LED, you're being exposed to UVA. "UVA is absolutely necessary for curing gel polish to your nail plate," says Adigun. UVA rays are the ones largely responsible for DNA damage that leads to signs of sun damage (think brown spots, wrinkling and thinning of the skin), says Adigun.

While you're only spending a short amount of time being exposed to UVA light during a gel manicure, this light is more intense than that from the sun, Adigun notes. That being said, Adigun adds that it's currently unknown whether any damage caused by UV lamps will turn into skin cancer. In a study published in JAMA Dermatology, researchers from the Medical College of Georgia hypothesized that even with repeat gel manicures, the risk for skin cancer caused by UV lamps remains relatively small.

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FIX 2: WEAR GLOVES TO THE SALON

Don't reach for sunscreen, which takes 20 minutes after slathering it on to become effective and can be difficult for a nail technician to work with. Not only that, but sunscreen has only been tested against the UV intensity from the sun, so there's no way of knowing if it'll work in this instance. Instead, Adigun recommends YouVeeShield, disposable gloves that block 99 percent of UV light.



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RISK 3: NAIL LOSS FROM PEELING OFF POLISH

Do not — we repeat, do not — peel off your gel polish under any circumstances. When you do this, you’re ripping off nail cell layers, says Minina. This can actually tear the top part of your nail plate off, leading to your nail plate separating from your nail bed, says Adigun. “I’ve seen multiple patients come in with no nails,” she says.

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FIX 3: TAKE YOUR TIME

Patience is key. If you're removing gel polish at home, use 100 percent real acetone, suggests Minina, which you can find at a beauty supply store. Soak a cotton pad in the acetone, place the pad on top of your nail, wrap it in foil, then wait for up to 15 minutes. "If the gel polish is cured appropriately, it should literally float off your nails with an acetone soak," says Adigun. But "acetone really dehydrates nails," says Adigun. Nourish your nails and the skin around them with jojoba oil afterward, says Minina.

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THE BOTTOM LINE ON GEL MANICURES

As long as you're visiting a licensed technician who's applying and removing your gel polish properly, there's no reason to stop getting gel manicures.

But between manicures, you should take a good look at your nails. "You could have an infection brewing under your nails and you don't even know what's there," says Adigun. Dark spots could be a sign of something more serious. "You don't want to miss those," says Adigun, who advises giving your nails a thorough scan once a month.

And try to keep your hands hydrated. "Use a nourishing cream after every wash, bath and shower," says Adigun.



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