

# Treating Common Nail Problems With Ease

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**N**ail problems are common, yet difficult to treat. Many dermatologists have encountered patients with cosmetic nail problems that could be easily identified and given a medical name, but viable treatment options were limited. Nails are difficult to treat because many times the problem requires new nail growth for resolution, which is time consuming. Because nails are non-living, new growth is the only treatment option for many cosmetic nail problems, yet the patient must be informed as to which activities should be avoided to prevent continuation of the problem. This article deals with a variety of nail conditions and presents treatment options for consideration.

## Brittle Nails

Brittle nails are the most common cosmetic nail condition I encounter in my practice. There are many reasons that nails may be brittle, but they all relate to the absence of water in the nail plate. Water is the plasticizer of the body, which allows tissues to be flexible. Because hands are washed frequently, so are nails. While living skin can be re-moisturized with water that is drawn to the stratum corneum from the dermis and trapped by oily substances, this is not the case with nonliving nails. Once the nail plate is dehydrated, the water content can never be fully replaced. Thus, I stress to my patients that it is unnecessary to vigorously wash their nails if they are not dirty.

One of the most common and more recent causes of nail plate dehydration stems from the popularity of waterless hand sanitizers, which contain triclosan, an antibacterial agent, in a rapidly evaporating vehicle. The vehicle efficiently removes water from the nail plate to a greater degree than traditional soap and water. For this reason, I advise my patients to avoid these hand sanitizers if brittle nails are a problem.

Nails can also become dehydrated from using cleaning fluids that contain ammonia, bleach, and strong detergents.

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Contact with these substances may be necessary, but gloves should be worn to protect the nails from dehydration. It is worthwhile reminding patients that coming into contact once with strong surfactants is enough for dehydration to occur; thus, consistency in hand protection is important.

## Broken Nails

Another common cosmetic nail problem is a broken nail where the break occurs proximal to the nail's free edge, resulting in removal of the nail from the nail bed. This type of broken nail is painful and a site of injury for infection. Even though the medical solution to this problem is new nail growth, a cosmetic repair can be helpful in alleviating pain and preventing infection. The technique for repairing a broken nail utilizes a tea bag and clear nail polish. The dry tea bag is cut and the tea leaves are emptied to obtain the surrounding fibered paper. A small piece of fibered paper is cut to fit over the nail break and 2 mm around the break. The broken nail is pushed back into place and covered with a layer of clear nail polish. The fibered paper is placed on the break and embedded in the clear nail polish followed by 2 to 3 extra coats. This technique reinforces the break because the fibered paper held in place by the clear nail polish acts as a semipermeable bandage until healing can occur.

This repair technique can be repeated as necessary as the nail grows. It uses commonly found materials costing little money. Most patients who experience this type of painful broken nail wear their nails too long. The easiest suggestion to remedy recurrent broken nails is to cut the nail such that the nail's free edge cannot be seen over the fingertip as viewed from the palm of the hand. Even though patients may not want to wear their nails shorter, it is the only clinically reproducible method for preventing broken nails.

## Longitudinal Nail Ridging

Longitudinal nail ridging is common as the nail bed ages. To explain the condition to patients, I liken longitudinal nail ridging to gray hairs. The ridge represents a group of nail matrix cells that are no longer producing a quality,

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smooth nail plate. Typically, the ridge is permanent, as more ridges appear with advancing age. Fortunately, the ridge is only on top of the nail plate and can be removed by sanding the nail plate.

The nail plate is best sanded with a series of 3 nail files. The first nail file is coarse and should sand the nail ridge until it is smooth. This is best determined by rubbing the treated nail with the finger pad of the same nail from the opposite hand. Once the nail is smooth, it is then filed with a finer file to increase smoothness. Lastly, a third file is used to achieve a high shine. The 3 files are usually sold together for under \$5 in drugstores and are labeled as cleaning, conditioning, and shining files. Each time nails are cut, the filing routine must be repeated because new nail growth will contain longitudinal ridges.

If patients do not wish to perform the filing at home, this sequential filing routine can be included as part of a regular manicure. The filing routine can be used by both men and women to remove longitudinal ridges and restore a more youthful appearance to the nail plate.

### Habit Tic

Habit tic deformity of the nail is usually characterized by horizontal ridges down the nail center. It results from repeated picking trauma to the nail and is most common when the thumbnail is manipulated by the first fingernail of the same hand. In most patients, it is a subconscious behavior in individuals who like to keep their hands moving. It is a hard habit to break. I have experienced some success by offering objects for manipulation, such as a smooth stone, a strand of beads, a piece of cloth, or a compressible ball. Instead of nail picking, the patient selects a comforting object to manipulate in their pocket. The ridges can be smoothed once the nail picking stops with the same sequential filing technique previously described for longitudinal ridges.

### Ingrown Nails

The final common cosmetic nail problem observed is an ingrown nail. Typically, the great toenail ingrows either due to trauma, ill-fitting shoes, or improper nail grooming. It is important to identify the cause of an ingrown

nail in order to allow healing to occur and to prevent recurrence. I find that educating patients on proper nail cutting is very helpful. Most individuals like to cut their toenails in a gentle arc with the longest part of the nail in the center of the toe, which is similar to the technique used for fingernail cutting. This grooming method causes trouble on the toenails, but not on the fingernails, because the feet are forced into rigid shoes compressing the toenail against the skin.

When a toenail is frequently ingrown and causes pain, it is sometimes accompanied by infection. The best way to cut toenails is to cut the sides of the nail longer than the center. This arc is opposite to the arc created by the toe pad. When the nail is shorter in the center and pressure is applied to the nail, the corners of the nail move out instead of toward the skin. This alternation in nail mechanics prevents the nail from ingrowing. It is also more difficult for the sides of the nail to ingrow when they are longer.

Once the nail has ingrown, the best way to encourage the nail to grow properly is to place a small ball of cotton under the nail that is entering the skin. The cotton will elevate the nail and allow it to grow beyond the surrounding edematous tissue. It is easiest for the dermatologist to insert the cotton in small amounts with a toothless Brown-Adson forcep, pushing as far under the nail as possible with minimal pain. If the cotton becomes dislodged, it can be replaced by the patient who can participate in the process in the office.

### Summary

This article has discussed the most common cosmetic nail problems. In many cases, brittle nails can be minimized by avoiding waterless hand sanitizers, whereas a broken nail can be semipermanently repaired with a dry tea bag and clear nail polish. The appearance of longitudinal nail ridging and habit tic deformity can be improved with sequential nail filing. Finally, an ingrown toenail can be helped with a cotton ball and prevented with proper nail grooming. While nail problems can be difficult to treat, some simple ideas may allow treatment with great ease. ■