

Nail Care – when to seek professional help

Nails in good condition can be very attractive. They also reflect an individual's personal habits - good or bad. Aside from their cosmetic appeal, nails serve many important functions. They help us pick up and manipulate objects and support and protect the tissues of the fingers and toes. Most importantly, nails often reflect our general state of health. To the trained eye, nails can provide valuable clues about your overall health. Although be aware, nail changes are rarely the first clue of an illness. In most instances, patients will manifest other signs or symptoms of disease before nail changes become evident.

Q: I've always had healthy nails, but as I get older, I find they are brittle and splitting. Is there anything I can do to help?

A: Your nails dry out as you age, losing their natural oils which act as a glue to hold the nail layers together. If you have thin fingernails and dry skin to begin with you can expect this to happen to you 'sooner rather than later'.

Here are a few things that can help:

1. **Hydrate and add oils.** Use creams, oils and ointments on your nails every day after they've been wet
2. **Clip and file your nails when they're wet.** Clipping and filing dry nails makes the splits worse so always do it after water exposure
3. **Wear gloves when you do rough work or get your hands into harsh chemicals.**

Q: I sometime get "white spots" on my nails – is this a concern?

A: White spots on the nails are very common. These small, semi-circular spots result from injury to the base (matrix) of the nail, where nail cells are produced. They are not a cause for concern, and will eventually grow out.

Q: The old saying "sticks out like a sore thumb" is true. Recently I damaged my thumbnail, not once but twice. The second time caused my nail to peel about 1/3 of the way down. It appears to be healing, is not painful and the color is good, but there is still a raised portion (at the bottom). Do I need to do anything – or just allow it to heal on its own?

A: It sounds as though the nail may be healing, although the raised portion may be permanent. If the nail does not continue to show progress, or becomes painful or discolored you should contact a dermatologist right away.

Q: How do I know when to see a dermatologist about a damaged nail?

A: Most minor nail injuries heal on their own, although, they might be unsightly for a while due to the nail's slow growth rate. If healthy fingernails begin to change color or texture, if symptoms persist, especially if the nails start to dislodge from the base or you experience pain and swelling, call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry (843) 689-5259 on Hilton Head Island or 843-705-0840 in Bluffton/Okatie to schedule an appointment. Our experienced staff will be able to provide proper treatment.