

DAY IN DAY OUT
WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR LIFESTYLE

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE:

What Your Fingernails Say About Your Health

Many of us may view our fingernails as purely aesthetic—something we can have fun with by painting or just keeping clean and short. However, a close look at your nails could tell you a lot about your health.

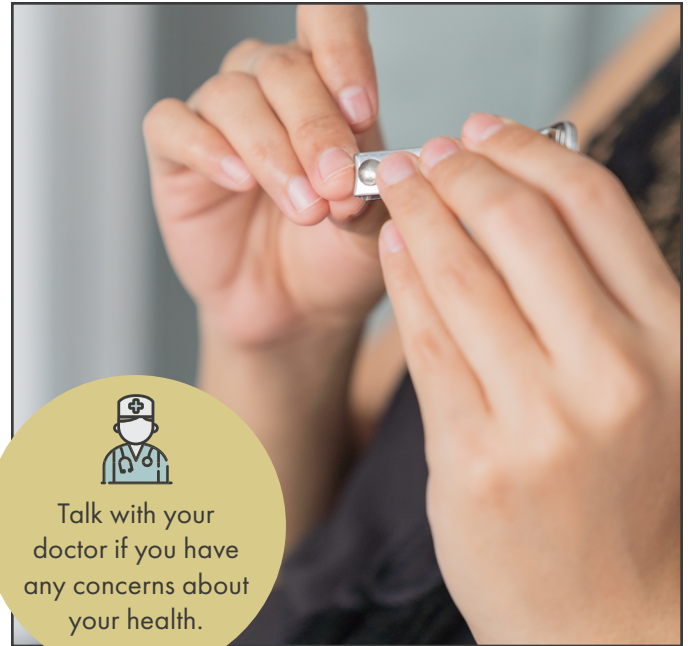
THE ANATOMY OF YOUR NAILS

Nails are actually specialized skin cells. They're made of keratin, a protein also found in your hair and skin. Your nails protect the ends of your fingers and toes. They also help you grip objects and access small things. It would be harder to turn the pages of a book or pick up a thread without fingernails!

The part of the nail you can see is called the nail plate. Nails grow from a region at the base of the nail under the skin called the nail matrix. Here, new nail cells are made and packed together. Older nail cells are then pushed to the surface of the fingertip.

SPOTTING NAIL PROBLEMS

Certain things can affect nail growth. A serious illness or fever can halt the process. The interruption can cause indentations that run horizontally across nails. These are called Beau's lines. They can also result from injury to the nail, some vitamin deficiencies, and chemotherapy.



Talk with your doctor if you have any concerns about your health.

Tiny pits in the nail can also be a sign of disease. It's common among people who have psoriasis. Psoriasis is an autoimmune disease that causes red, scaly patches of skin. Nail pitting is also linked to an autoimmune condition that causes hair loss, called alopecia areata.

If your nails start to scoop inward like a spoon, also called koilonychia, you may not be getting enough iron or it may be a sign of iron deficiency anemia. Because of a lack of iron, your body can't make enough of the molecule that red blood cells need to carry oxygen.

Nail clubbing, where the nail tips enlarge and curve around the tip, is another nail problem. It could be a harmless trait that runs in your family. But it's also linked to lung and heart problems.

Changes in nail color are common. Yellow nails are often caused by nail fungus. In some cases, they can point to something more serious like lung disease. If you notice your nails have become mostly white, it may just be a sign of aging. But sometimes it's due to serious

conditions like liver and kidney disease or diabetes. Dark streaks running down the length of the nail that appear suddenly should be checked to rule out skin cancer. Certain infections, especially of the heart, can cause red streaks to appear under the nails.

Although some of these changes may seem scary, it's important to know that many nail changes are normal and nothing to worry about. Talk with your health care provider if your nails start to look abnormal or if you have concerns. Your doctor may send you to see a dermatologist who specializes in diseases that affect the skin and nails.

Hands-On Self Care for Your Nails

- » Try not to bite, pick, or tear at your nails.
- » Clip hangnails. Be careful not to tear or remove cuticles, as that may lead to an infection.
- » Keep your fingernails dry and clean to prevent bacteria from growing under nails.
- » Moisturize your nails and cuticles with hand lotion.
- » Limit your use of harsh nail care products like nail polish remover.
- » Ask your health care provider about medicines that can help with abnormal nails. If you have a nail infection, you may need antifungal or antibacterial treatment.

