

SHOULD WE GIVE GEL POLISH THE FINGER?

It's been 10 years since gel manicures became a regular part of our beauty regimes. But beyond the glossy finish, what have they really been doing to our nails? *Stylist* investigates...

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THIS MAKES US WANT TO
LITERALLY WRAP OUR
NAILS IN COTTON WOOL



ust another Sunday at my local nail bar. I asked for my fortnightly gel manicure, sat down in the manicurist's chair and picked my usual nude-pink shade. It felt like every other time I'd been there, and I'd been there a *lot* – 364 times approximately over the course of seven years as a self-confessed gel polish addict.

But this time, as the therapist ran the coarse file back and forth on my little fingernail, I was jolted out of my daydreaming by the file going *through* the nail plate and hitting that bit of tissue-y skin that no-one wants to know about, let alone see or feel. It was exposed, it was raw and it was *agony*. The therapist looked like she wanted to cry. And I did. Mainly because of the shock of seeing my actual 'nail bed', but also because it was time to admit my obsession with gels had finally caught up with me.

With my little finger bandaged up, I consulted podiatrist Martine

"I'VE HAD 364 MANICURES OVER SEVEN YEARS"

Abrahams of The London Nail Laser Clinic. "It's the application and removal of the gels that causes issues – not the polish itself. If you use an inexperienced, harried manicurist, the harsh drilling and rough pushing back of the cuticles can permanently damage the nail matrix [the very formation of the nail]. Plus the excessive acetone used to remove the polish can dehydrate the nails, causing them to become brittle and thin." Perilously thin in my case.

Though gel manicures have been around since the Eighties from brands such as Bio Sculpture, it wasn't until 2007 when CND's Shellac made it more affordable and regularly available. Since then there have been 16 million professional Shellac manicures performed in the UK, which amounts to one every 10 seconds. A decade on, we're beginning to see the impact on our nail health. Have them too frequently (experts recommend at least a month's break between appointments) and you can cause lasting damage to your nails. But prep them beforehand and deploy a few smart protective steps, and you can have gels and healthy nails. Here's how...

1. ASSESS YOUR NAIL HEALTH

Dr David Jack, Harley Street Aesthetic Doctor, on how to maximise your nails' strength...

"Back to back gel manicures can obscure nail damage, so do take a break to check them every so often. Nails are essentially dead keratin, so while topical products can improve the appearance, you need to maintain your nail health from the inside out.

Having a diet rich in, or supplemented with vitamins C, E and B12 will help maintain strong nails, as will making sure you're getting ample amounts of protein. Lacking in folic acid or zinc can also cause brittle nails, or oval-shaped white marks on the nails. Your nails are actually a very good barometer of your overall health, as deficiencies

show up most visibly there. If they're consistently weak and flaky but your diet is good, think about lifestyle factors. Harsh domestic cleaning products can damage nails, as can using a keyboard, the typing can cause micro-trauma to the nail matrix where the nail bed grows. A protein building block such as Biotin, £5.24, Solgar, will help protect against that." Still struggling? See below.



WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

BENDY NAILS

It could be genetic, but often with gel addicts it's not just in-salon buffing that causes nail thinness, it's when we pick the polish off: "That can remove the top layer of the nail and reduces their strength. It also makes them thinner and prone to breakage," says Abrahams.

FLAKY NAILS

Are your nails flakier than a Tinder date? It's due to too much water exposure. Nails are very porous, so even a little water can seep between the layers and dehydrate it, causing the layers to peel. Dry your hands well after washing, and always use Marigolds when washing up.

SLOW-GROWING NAILS

Press your nail – is there a hint of pink? That shows there's a plentiful blood supply to your nails. They should grow 3mm a month, but if that's not the case it's likely they're not getting the right nutrients. Increase blood flow by massaging in a cuticle oil such as Solar Oil, £12.95, CND.

2. RESTORE THEM BACK TO HEALTH

Stylist's beauty team picks the best treatments for the most common nail concerns

WEAK NAILS

Mavala Platinum Spa Manicure, from £30 for 75 minutes, available nationwide

It sounds counterintuitive, but if your nails bend at the tips, they need deep hydration. This treatment starts with a hand scrub to get rid of any dead skin around the cuticles that inhibit growth, followed by an intensive massage to promote blood circulation and bring oxygen and nutrients to the surface of your skin. Hands are then lathered in a conditioning mask designed to penetrate through the nail plate, to give a boost of hydration on all layers. After two days, they'll be tough as... nails.

RIDGED NAILS

IBX Nail Strengthening System, £30 for 30 minutes, available at Richard Ward, London

Back-to-back gel devotees will notice nail ridges where their polish has grown out. This treatment is designed to be applied under gel polish to help repair the nail bed. It's painted on like regular varnish and cured under a heated dryer for one minute, which allows the active jojoba and avocado oils to penetrate deeply. As well as hydrating your nails for strength, it also fills in grooves and adds a protective layer to your nail, ready for the next round of gel.

PEELING NAILS

Nails Inc Signature Manicure, £36 for 30 minutes, available nationwide

If your nails peel before they even grow past your fingertips, this treatment powered by superfood ingredients will sort them out. First, nails are soaked in a strengthening collagen rinse before being given a caffeine scrub to cleanse the nail bed and plate. Then, a coat of Superfood Nail Kale Base Coat enriched with vitamins A, C, E, F and H, aloe vera, ginseng, grape and pomegranate, to give your nails all of the nutrients they need to avoid flaking.



BARRY M (BOOTS.COM), CND (CULTBEAUTY.CO.UK), DEBORAH LIPPMANN (SELFRIDGES.COM), ESSIE (BOOTS.COM), IBX (RICHARDWARD.COM), LA ROCHE-POSAY (FEELUNIQUE.COM), LANOLIPS (LOOKFANTASTIC.CO.UK), MAVALA (MAVALA.CO.UK), MAYBELLINE NEW YORK (SUPERDRUG.COM), NAILS INC (NAILSINC.COM), OPI (JOHNLEWIS.COM), ORLY (SUPERDRUG.COM), REVERENCE DE BASTIEN (NET-A-PORTER.COM), REV'LON (BOOTS.COM), RICHARD WARD (RICHARDWARD.COM), RIMMEL (BOOTS.COM), SALLY HANSEN (SUPERDRUG.COM), SENSATIONAL (BOOTS.COM), SOLGAR (SOLGAR.CO.UK), THE LONDON NAIL LASER CLINIC (THELONDONNAILLASERCLINIC.CO.UK), TOPSHOP (TOPSHOP.COM)

3. DAMAGE-PROOF YOUR GEL MANICURE

The genius gel-polish tricks you need to know

1. Remove the polish yourself:

To avoid mechanical buffing tools, “Gently buff nails, cut cotton pads into quarters and soak in acetone. Place on each nail and wrap in tin foil for 10 minutes, then scrape gently with a cuticle stick,” says nail expert Michelle Humphrey. Try Gel Polish Remover, £6, SensatioNail.



2. Use an SPF: Both UV and LED lamps – used to ‘harden’ gel polish – can emit UV radiation that can increase skin damage and hyper pigmentation, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. Take an SPF50 with you, such as Anhelios XL SPF50+, £16.50, La Roche-Posay.



3. Bring your own glass file: The emery board used by manicurists can shred the keratin in the nail, causing splitting and flaking. Glass files seal the keratin layers together at the edge of the nail so they’re far less likely to flake. Try Glass Nail File, £13, Reverence de Bastien – just don’t drop it!



YOUR FOUR-WEEK NAIL CARE PLAN

Gel addicts, here’s your plan for getting the most from your manicures while safeguarding your nail health

WEEK 1

Get your gels done

Apply a lanolin hand cream like Rose Hand Cream Intense, £9.18, Lanolips, first. Found in sheep’s wool, lanolin is similar to oils found in human skin, so your thirsty nails and hands will absorb it readily – gel lamps can be drying.

WEEK 2

Stop any lifting (and picking)

Your nails will have grown by roughly 1mm, so the polish might start to peel off, tempting you to pick it. Gently brush underneath the lifted part with clear polish and press down with an orange stick before applying clear polish over the whole nail.

WEEK 3

Care for your cuticles

The gap near the cuticle is widening now – massage cuticle oil into the nail tips and ends, which are carrying the ‘weight’ of the gel polish. “Apply it to the undersides of the nails at night to keep them from dehydrating and tearing,” says Humphrey.

WEEK 4

They’ve got to go

Time for removal now they’ve grown out. Soak the polish off yourself and take a week’s break – focusing on your nail health by using Nail Rehab, £9.95, Sally Hansen, which has vitamin E to repair nails, and a soft pink hue to conceal ridges and damage. Done!



4. TIME FOR A GEL BREAK?

If you’re having a rest from in-salon gel manicures, here are 12 regular polishes that give five-plus days without chipping

BOLDS



Super Gel in Sun Fun Daze, £5.99, Rimmel London



Breathable Treatment + Colour in Feeling Free, £12, Orly



Nail Enamel in Eclectic, £6.49, Revlon

REDS



Gel Lab Pro in Venus in Furs, £18, Deborah Lippmann



Super Gel in Rock N Roll, £5.99, Rimmel London



Miracle Gel in Red Eye, £9.99, Sally Hansen

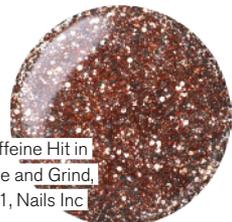
GLITTER



Nail Paint in Ethereal Forest, £2.99, Barry M



Color Show All Access in Boogie, £3.99, Maybelline New York



Caffeine Hit in Rise and Grind, £11, Nails Inc

NUDES



Treat Love Colour in See The Light, £8.99, Essie



Nail Lacquer in I’ll Have A Gin & Tectonic, £12.50, OPI



Breathable Treatment + Colour in Pamper Me, £12, Orly