

# Nice Nails!

(But How **Safe Is Your Salon?**)

Getting your nails done is the ultimate in pampering, but dirty equipment, unqualified personnel, and banned chemicals can mean getting more than you bargained for

By Eva Chanda



It's easy to see why a salon manicure or pedicure is so enjoyable: perfectly polished nails, neatly shaped cuticles, and baby-soft skin. But how about hideously discoloured or permanently deformed nails, itchy red cuticles, or boils? What many spa regulars don't know is that these and other unpleasant results are more common than they think. Incredibly, there aren't many safeguards in the Canadian nail care industry. That's why you should be an

informed customer. Here's what you need to know about the good, the bad, and the ugly of nail salons.

## Bad Habits Exposed

The number-one nail care no-no is infection. We're quick to point the finger at a salon's lack of sanitation—it's obvious that contaminated equipment could spread disease. But Toronto dermatologist Dr. Benjamin Barankin says that a common nail care habit—cuticle shaping—is often to blame.

"The cuticle is there for a very good reason: it protects the area between the finger and the nail from water, fungi, and bacteria," Barankin says. "If you're too aggressive with pushing back or trimming the cuticle, you can create an opening for these to get in."

Barankin would prefer to see cuticles left alone altogether, but barring that, he suggests asking the nail technician not to trim too much off, or to just gently push them back.

Another bad habit is care-

lessness leading to broken skin. Nail care shouldn't hurt. If the nail area gets nicked and there's blood, Barankin suggests applying an antibiotic cream twice a day to the wound.

Other times, we unknowingly contribute to the problem. For example, shaving can create tiny cuts that are plenty big enough for bugs to get in, Barankin notes. He recommends waiting at least 24 to 48 hours after shaving, or even waxing your legs, before getting a pedicure.

Abused artificial nails offer another avenue for infections, reports Enza Scrocco, a Montreal nail technician.

"If the artificial nail starts to lift off, it can create air pockets, trapping air and water against the real nail. Air pockets can be very inviting to fungus," Scrocco says. But she also warns: don't peel off the loose enhancement as this can damage the real nail.

### Fungus Among Us

Once there's an opening in the skin, gatecrashing bugs don't necessarily come from dirty tools.

"Regular skin bacteria can cause an infection, making the skin red, tender, swollen, and with a build-up of pus, or they may cause boils," Barankin explains.

If these symptoms don't clear up after a few days, he urges seeing a doctor promptly: most bacterial skin infections can be treated fairly easily, but some rare kinds may be life threatening.

Nail fungus is another common invader. Again, unsanitary salon equipment isn't the sole source, Barankin notes—it's often "the fungus among us," especially on feet, which easily pick up athlete's foot and other fungi at the pool or gym. If you have thickened, crumbly, yellow, or darkened nails on your hands or feet, it's probably nail fungus. These critters can be tough to get rid of, so talk to your doctor about prescription treatment options.

Barankin also reports salons with poor hygiene practices can spread a less common but gruesome skin infection from tuberculosis-like germs called mycobacteria, which can brew in improperly cleaned whirlpool footbaths. The infection starts as red pimple-like bumps on the legs that, after weeks or months, turn into large, tender, pus-filled boils. It can take several months of antibiotics to heal the boils, which usually leave scars.

### Safety Standards

So how do you know if a salon is trustworthy? If you live in Manitoba, New Brunswick, or Nova Scotia, you're in luck—these provincial governments regulate their cosmetology and nail industries. To become licensed to work in the field, people have to graduate from training programs at registered schools, pass provincial examinations, and maintain certification, and salons are regularly inspected. But Dana Sharkey,

provincial examining/licensing committee chairperson of the Cosmetology Association of Nova Scotia, concedes that undergound operations are definitely a problem.

"Consumers should look for inspection stickers and estheticians or nail technicians with up-to-date licences," Sharkey advises.

In other provinces, there's a confusing patchwork of laws. For example, British Columbia used to require licensing of cosmetologists and nail technicians, but stopped in 2003. Since then, the Cosmetology Industry Association of B.C. reports a 10-fold jump in complaints of injuries and

## Contaminated equipment could spread disease.

fraud. Meanwhile, several regional health authorities monitor sanitation in B.C. salons. And in Quebec, people who've taken as little as a one-day course can call themselves nail technicians, says Gaëlle Mouster, editor-in-chief of *ExceptionNail.Beauty*, a Canadian trade magazine for nail and makeup professionals. "The customer really has to pay attention and ask the right questions. But there are a lot of good salons, too. It's not a completely dismal report card for the profession."

## Fake Nails, **Real Dangers?**

If you've been tempted to get artificial nails at a nail salon offering a full set for only \$30, watch out: those cheapo fake nails could be a real rip-off.

The most common nail enhancements are called acrylic or sculptured nails; they're made by combining liquid and powdered acrylics and then brushing them onto your nail. But certain nail salons are still using a hazardous liquid acrylic known as MMA (methyl methacrylate), prohibited for nail use by Health Canada in 2003 because it makes enhancements too rigid and too strongly stuck to the natural nail. If the nail gets caught on something, it's likely to tear off the real nail, which might be permanently damaged or lost. MMA is also allergenic if it touches the skin: signs include a red rash, itchiness, and small oozing blisters. MMA can also irritate the nose and throat and cause headaches.

Acrylic nails made with Health Canada-approved professional products are available. According to Scrocco, a full set of acrylic nails should cost at least \$50, due to the higher price of legitimate products. Other options are ultraviolet (UV) gel nails—an acrylic with a honey-like consistency and no unpleasant odour is brushed

on and then hardened under a UV lamp—and wraps, which involve applying silk, linen, or fibreglass fabric to the nail with a thin layer of acrylic resin.

But Barankin says bluntly, "All acrylics are allergens. Once you're allergic to them, you can't use them again. A bad enough reaction can deform the nails forever. Dermatologists aren't big fans of artificial nails for that reason. If you have dry, brittle nails, speak to your dermatologist—we have other options, such as biotin supplements [a vitamin], that can strengthen nails."

### **Signs That a Salon Is Using MMA**

- A strong, sweet chemical odour
- Extremely hard artificial nails that are very difficult to file
- Artificial nails that won't soak off in solutions made to remove acrylics—they have to be ground down to the real nail using electric files
- Low cost for a full set of acrylic nails or a fill-in—MMA is much cheaper than safer alternatives
- Products in unlabelled containers—and the technician won't show or tell you the brand being used

### **What to Look For**

If you're thinking about going to a new nail salon, or you'd like to see how your current one stacks up, here are some questions you should consider asking.

**Is the salon clean?** The workstation and instruments should be clean, dust-free, and disinfected—and don't be afraid to ask how they do it. Reusable tools must be cleaned and then disinfected with alcohol or bleach solutions. The best method, Barankin notes, is to sterilize them like surgical instruments, with pressurized steam (also known as autoclaving). Disposable items

should actually be thrown out after each use, and every customer needs a fresh, clean towel. (Another option is to bring your own tools from home for the technician to use.) The nail technician's hands and your hands and feet must be disinfected before proceeding. Footbaths should be drained after each client, scrubbed with soap and water (especially behind the screen), and disinfected by running a hospital-grade disinfectant solution through them for 10 minutes. Check out the bathroom, too—it's a valuable clue to the salon's attitude towards cleanliness.

**Do you and your nail tech-**

**nician communicate well?** You should be able to discuss the different nail procedures, hygiene practices, and your needs. For a pedicure, the technician should examine your feet and ensure that you're in good health before going ahead. If you're having nail enhancements done, he or she should explain how to maintain them.

**Is the nail technician properly trained?** Make sure the technician graduated from a legitimate school and is up to scratch in hygiene techniques. And for artificial nails, experience counts, too—according to Scrocco, a technician has to apply at least 100 full sets to really nail the technique.

**Does the air smell okay?** Many nail products have odours, but knockout fumes are a tip-off that ventilation is poor, or it might mean the salon is using MMA (see box at left).

**Was the nail care experience painless?** A nail technician should never hurt you or make you bleed. Don't have calluses removed with a razor blade (or only with a sterile, single-use blade)—it's too easy to get cut. When using an electric file, the technician shouldn't take off too much of the natural nail, and you shouldn't feel any pain or burning—if you do, tell him or her to stop right away.

**Does the salon use high-quality products?** Look for Health Canada-approved professional products (available only to certified estheticians and nail technicians) in their original containers. ■