Nails: Clues to Your Health Are at Your Fingertips

Did you know that your fingernails could provide you with valuable clues about your overall health? Many conditions and diseases can manifest themselves in nails.

“Pitting, different-colored lines, or visible ridges or spots on your fingernails, or nails that become brittle and break easily can be red flags,” says Beth Kassanoff, M.D., FACP, an internist at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas. “These changes can indicate a broad range of systemic health conditions—anything from a deficiency of certain nutrients in your diet to an underlying disease requiring medical treatment.”

At the root of the problem
Nails change over time. Just as skin tends to become drier with age, so do nails. They may become thicker, thinner, or rougher and develop fissures, ridges, or splits. Nails can also become discolored and dull and take on a yellow or gray hue, or even become opaque. Meanwhile, the lunula—the white half-moon at the base of nails—disappears in some people as they age. Nail abnormalities may indicate a health disorder that needs medical attention. Some signs to look for include:

■ Clubbing. One or more fingernails may start to curve downward and appear detached from the nail bed; your fingertips may also become enlarged. Nail clubbing is most often associated with lung disease, but it may also signal cardiovascular disease, liver disease, inflammatory bowel disease, or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Clubbing may also be hereditary.

■ Spoon shape. Nails that are concave or thin and flat are associated with iron deficiency and anemia, but they’re more often caused by trauma or chemical exposure. Chemotherapy also may cause spoon nail, or koilonychia.

■ Horizontal depressions. These depressions are known as Beau’s lines, named after the specialist who first identified the abnormality—as are many other nail disorders. Beau’s lines can occur as a result of an injury or trauma to the nail or nail bed, or an illness, condition, or treatment that affects the overall body, such as severe infection, malnutrition, or chemotherapy. The lines can also appear if you have peripheral vascular disease (a blood-vessel disease that affects the limbs), uncontrolled diabetes, or a zinc deficiency.

■ Double white lines. Also referred to as Muehrcke’s nails, these double white lines run horizontally across the length of the nails and are sometimes associated with liver or kidney disease. They may occur after chemotherapy, as well.

■ Dark bands. White nail plates with a darker band of color at the top may indicate a condition called Terry’s nails. While normal aging is a possible culprit, dark bands can also be a sign of a serious illness, such as liver disease (cirrhosis), congestive heart failure, diabetes, or HIV.

■ Brittle nails. Onychoschizia, or brittle nails, may sometimes, but rarely, be an indication of excessive vitamin A intake or conditions such as thyroid disease or osteoporosis (brittle bones). You may also find your nails breaking and splitting easily from too-frequent manicures, aging (up to 30 percent of women 50 and older have brittle nails), or regular exposure of nails to water or chemicals, common among people with such occupations as dishwashers, housekeepers, or hairstylists.

■ Pitting. Nail pitting, characterized by small depressions (“pits”) in the nail surface, is most often associated with nail psoriasis. The condition is also linked to skin dermatitis and certain connective tissue disorders such as reactive arthritis (once known as Reiter’s syndrome), sarcoidosis (an inflammatory disease), and alopecia areata (which causes hair loss).

■ Red, pink, or brown horizontal stripes. Known as half-and-half nails, apparent leukonychia, or Lindsay’s nails, these stripes can appear on up to 60 percent of the nail and be accompanied by dull, grainy white areas. Such nail changes can signal poor kidney function, such as chronic kidney failure and uremia (when waste products build up in the blood).

“If you notice any nail abnormalities, see your doctor, who can determine whether your nails may be revealing a change in your health status and should be further evaluated,” Dr. Kassanoff says. “Most abnormalities are cosmetic, but you want to err on the side of caution.”

Be on the lookout for skin cancer under the nail
Subungual melanoma is a rare form of skin cancer that occurs under the nail, usually on the thumb or big toe. It appears as a longitudinal dark band that’s at least a few millimeters wide. Unlike the more common melanomas that appear on the skin in more easily seen areas, such as the torso or the leg, subungual melanomas are often overlooked because they mimic so many other nail conditions. For instance, any trauma to the nail can cause a blood blister, which looks similar to subungual melanoma. Fungal or bacterial infections also can cause the nail to discolor.

Experts advise people over age 50 who notice symptoms such as a new dark spot under their nail or the widening of an existing dark streak to consult a dermatologist. Darkening of the associated cuticle or nail fold is particularly worrisome since it can reflect “Hutchinson’s sign,” which can indicate melanoma.

Surgery is usually warranted to remove the cancer completely. Because these growths are typically found when they’re advanced, the prognosis is poor, with a five-year survival rate of 59 percent, according to some estimates.

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