

Are you taking good care of your nails? Here's what you need to know to keep your fingernails in tiptop shape.

Take a close look at your fingernails. Are they strong and healthy looking? Or do you see ridges, dents, or areas of unusual color or shape? Many less than desirable nail conditions can be avoided through proper fingernail care. Others indicate an underlying condition that requires attention.
Fingernails: What's normal, what's not

Your fingernails ? composed of laminated layers of a protein called keratin ? grow from the area at the base of the nail under your cuticle. As new cells grow, older cells become hard and compacted and are eventually pushed out toward your fingertips.

Healthy fingernails are smooth, without pits or grooves. They're uniform in color and consistency and free of spots or discoloration. Sometimes fingernails develop harmless vertical ridges that run from the cuticle to the tip of the nail. Vertical ridges tend to become more prominent with age. Fingernails can also develop white lines or spots due to injury, but these eventually grow out with the nail.

Not all nail conditions are normal, however. Consult your doctor or dermatologist if you notice:

Changes in nail color, such as discoloration of the entire nail or a dark streak under the nail
Changes in nail shape, such as curled nails
Thinning or thickening of the nails
Separation of the nail from the surrounding skin
Bleeding around the nails
Redness, swelling or pain around the nails
Fingernail care: Do's and don'ts

To keep your fingernails looking their best, follow these simple guidelines.

Do:

Keep your fingernails dry and clean. This prevents bacteria, fungi and other organisms from growing under your fingernails. Wear cotton-lined rubber gloves when washing dishes, cleaning or using harsh chemicals, and avoid long soaks in the tub.

Trim and file your fingernails regularly. Use a sharp manicure scissors or clippers. Trim your nails straight across, then round the tips in a gentle curve. It might be easiest to trim and file your fingernails when they're soft, such as after bathing.

Use moisturizer. When you use hand lotion, rub the lotion into your fingernails and cuticles, too.

Don't:

Abuse your fingernails. To prevent nail damage, don't use your fingernails as tools to pick, poke or pry things.

Bite your fingernails or pick at your cuticles. These habits can damage the nail bed. Even a minor cut alongside your fingernail can allow bacteria or fungi to enter and cause an infection.

Pull off hangnails. You might rip live tissue along with the hangnail. Instead, carefully clip off hangnails.

Ignore problems. If you have a nail problem that doesn't seem to go away on its own or is associated with other signs and symptoms, consult your doctor or dermatologist for an evaluation.