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Nail care safety

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I recently went to a local salon for a manicure, and when I asked the manicurist not to cut my cuticles, she looked at me as though I was offending her. Shortly thereafter, I took a phone call that swayed my attention, and she secretly dove in and quickly started cutting my cuticles thinking I would not notice. Why is cuticle-cutting a necessary part of nail care ... and almost a rampant ritual?



Dr. Lily Talakoub

The cuticle is the protective barrier surrounding the nail plate and nail folds. Biting, pulling, or improper cutting of the cuticle over time can cause long-term damage to the nail plate, such as ridging of the nail, median nail dystrophy, or permanent destruction of the nail plate. Trimming the cuticles can also break the seal that protects the surrounding skin and nails. Not only can the removal of the cuticle introduce infection,

but it can also cause deformities in the nail plate itself. Infections to consider around the nail include acute or chronic paronychia, herpetic whitlow, onychomycosis, and warts. These infections can be the direct result of entry from the removal of the cuticle barrier or improperly cleaned and sterilized instruments.

Tools used to remove cuticles can transfer infections. In addition to skin infections, viruses that cause systemic infections, such as hepatitis C, can live in dry blood for up to 3 days and can be transferred on tools that have not been cleaned properly. Sterilized tools must first be cleaned and submerged in antiseptic solutions, then sterilized in an autoclave or a Food and Drug Administration–registered dry-heat sterilizer, not a UV box. UV boxes are commonly used and do not actually sterilize tools; they keep tools clean only if they have been previously sterilized.



Dr. Naissan Wesley

The best way to ensure proper sterilization is to check the indicator tape or indicator color on the packaging. Autoclave tape and dry heat sterilizer strips work by changing colors when exposed to a certain temperature (and pressure for the autoclave tape) for a certain amount of time. I routinely check the sterilizing packets and immediately look up the indicator color on the Internet to ensure the color change was correct. I ask about what sterilization techniques the salon uses, and I often require salons to use my own nail care tools (which should be cleaned after every use).

Trimming or cutting cuticles is a bad habit and can be a dangerous salon ritual. Many states, such as New York and Massachusetts, do not allow manicurists to cut the cuticles given blood-borne pathogen risks and improper sanitation; however, this regulation is often loosely enforced. It also creates an endless cycle of cuticle trimming as the growing cuticle can often look frayed – and thus creates the need for them to be cut over and over again. Pushing the cuticle back may be a better option for those who prefer the cosmetic appearance of trimmed cuticles, but it still poses a portal of entry for pathogens.

Let's educate our patients, the salons, and the regulatory boards to prevent the spread of infection and ensure safe nail care techniques.

Dr. Wesley and Dr. Talakoub are co-contributors to a monthly Aesthetic Dermatology column in Dermatology News. Dr. Talakoub is in private practice in McLean, Va. Dr. Wesley practices dermatology in Beverly Hills, Calif. This month's column is by Dr. Talakoub.

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