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BODY MAKEOVER ISSUE

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Quick solutions for problem nails

In some cases, deformities or discoloration may signal disease. Extremely pale nails, for example, may indicate anemia; yellow ones are almost always a sign of a fungal infection, but may indicate diabetes. For most of us, unsightly nails are usually just a sign of neglect, or chronic maltreatment at the hands of a manicurist.

Brittleness

In young women, brittle nails may signal protein deficiency; only a change of diet will help. But the most common cause of brittleness is too little moisture: Try soaking fingertips in warm water for 10 minutes at night; then seal in moisture with petroleum jelly, advises Alan Kling, M.D., associate professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. File nails only when they are wet and at their most flexible. (The ceramic Camille nail file is extra gentle and carries a lifetime guarantee. Available for \$20, case included. Call 800-968-FILE.)

Thick cuticles

For overgrown, untended cuticles, start by brushing on cuticle remover (remember to wash it off carefully, since some contain sodium hydroxide, a potential irritant). To try: Barielle Extra Gentle Cuticle Minimizer; Cutex Cuticle Care Creamy Cuticle Remover. Then gently file thick cuticles, using a fine-grain file, says Elizabeth Lata, a nail-care expert in New York City. Nightly applications of cream or oil help control ragged edges. (Try Revlon Cuticle Massage Cream, Creative Nail Design's SolarOil, containing jojoba and sweet almond oil, Goodebodies Horsetail Cuticle Cream or Cutex Medicated Cuticle Rescue, containing menthol and vitamin E.)

Vertical ridges

Lines that go from the base of your nail to the tip are signs of aging, like wrinkles. To diminish these ridges,

Dr. Kling suggests buffing once a week or more with a chamois buffer if nails are thick; less often if they're thin. Don't use buffing powders; they're too abrasive. Instead, try Salon Systems Buffing Gel, with finely ground particles that gently reduce ridges and aloe that hydrates and smooths nails. If you wear polish, try a ridge-filling base coat.

Soft nails

If you apply any polish, it will trap moisture, thus preventing breakage and peeling. To protect especially weak nails, choose a polish that contains rayon or nylon fibers. Avoid nail hardeners—they can be drying. One salon option is a liquid wrap, another type of fibrous coating, which lasts about a week. After a manicure, it's brushed on lengthwise, dried, then brushed on horizontally. A top coat is applied to smooth the nail's appearance. □

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