

ASK THE NATUROPATH | BY EMILY A. KANE, ND, LAc

NAILS AND YOUR HEALTH

Q: My nails chronically split and peel. Why does this happen and what can I do about it?
—Holly G., Bakersfield, CA

A: Peeling nails may indicate a problem with mineral absorption. This can be caused by something as simple as not adequately chewing food. It can also be caused by low stomach acid, which leads to problems digesting protein; protein requires stomach acids to be properly broken down and absorbed into the blood stream.

Brittle nails can be a sign of low thyroid function. Nails that split or peel easily are more likely to be brittle, and this can be an occupational hazard for those who need to wash their hands frequently. Frequent exposure to water or detergent can weaken nails, and so can dehydration. Brittle, easily breaking nails can be treated with a variety of natural substances, and also awareness of keeping your hands and nails clean, but hydrated. Use a good, natural moisturizer on your hands after washing, and wear gloves if you do dishes in the sink.

Nutrients that are good for the hair are usually also good for nails. These include high-dose silica, vitamin A (25,000 IUs daily), fish oils, and biotin (10,000 mcg daily). Trace minerals are key for healthy nails. Try taking a zinc lozenge: if it tastes very strong to you, that typically means you are replete in zinc, and don't need additional mega-doses. If you taste nothing metallic, this often means you need zinc and should supplement 50 mg daily until the taste is strong.

Certain oils and salves applied topically can strengthen nails. Try a cream made from calendula and comfrey. It works for hangnails, paper cuts, and even to repair and moisturize the nail itself. Comfrey is brilliant for superficial wounds because it speeds up the process of surface cells, helping to fill the gap of the wound. In no particular order, the following essential oils can be placed on nail surfaces to strengthen them and make them more flexible so they are less likely to break off: tea tree, holy basil, grape seed, pumpkin seed, rose hip, rosemary, and also aloe vera gel. Experiment with what works best for your nails.

It goes without saying that you should strenuously avoid biting or chewing your nails. One of the more common reasons for an adult to get acute appendicitis is from swallowing an indigestible scrap of their own fingernail! If you want painted or artificial nails for a special occasion or for breaking the nail-biting habit, it won't hurt occasionally. But for 51 weeks out of the year, let your nails go bare. They will look much better for it in the long run.



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