

Manicure Safety: Six Things That Should Scare You



Avoid a manicure-gone-wrong with these expert tips. Photo: Alamy

Danger seems to lurk everywhere these days, from the **foods we eat** (or don't eat) to the gadgets we use to the amount of **sun** that hits our skin. And now you're probably rolling your eyes at the idea that even your relaxing **manicure** isn't risk free.

While many **salons** and spas abide by state regulations to offer a healthy respite for your digits and **tootsies**, others still throw caution to the wind when it comes to cleanliness and proper **nail care**. Nail pros and medical experts weigh in on what to be cautious of before placing your hands on the manicure table again.

1. Not all manicures are created equal. "The level of complete disregard for manicuring and health and sanitation is just absolutely appalling," says celebrity manicurist Beth Fricke, who has groomed the nails of everyone from **Angelina Jolie** to **Zoe Saldana**. "There are good ones out there, and you just have to be

aware and ask questions. Basically what you want to look for is that the tools are cleaned with soap, water and a nailbrush. Then they need to be soaked. Sometimes they do that ahead of time and put them in the sanitary bags. Ask them what their process is. I have no problem with people asking me how I clean my tools. That's a question I should be able to answer."

Brad Masterson, communications manager for the Professional Beauty Association, agrees that communication is key. He suggests asking your manicurist these questions: "How often do you sterilize equipment? How do you prevent cross contamination in the salon? Is there someone at the salon that is in charge of making sure safety standards are followed?" He adds, "If they cannot answer questions like this, it should be a red flag. All nail technicians should know this basic information and be able to give a confident answer. If they can't, it might not be a place you want to go to."

2. Cleanliness is key. No matter how tender the touch of the manicurist, occasionally a little bleeding will occur during a treatment, which is why proper cleaning and sterilization is so important.

Dr. Paul Bryson, director of research and development for **OPI** and scientific adviser for **ROBIB Salon**, offers a general overview of proper implement cleaning and sterilization, but points out that it's impossible to briefly summarize all of the local, state and national laws.

The process should begin with "pre-cleaning the tools with soap and water, followed by total immersion in an EPA-registered hospital disinfectant (or, in Canada, a DIN-registered disinfectant), diluted and used according to manufacturer's directions. This is sufficient to ensure health," says Bryson. "This satisfies most regulatory agencies as well. Some states insist that the disinfectant be tuberculocidal, and some states allow bleach to be used."

Some states, like Texas, require nail tools to be autoclaved.

"Autoclaves need to be regularly tested and maintained to be sure they work," says Bryson. "UV sterilizers are almost useless and are not a substitute for autoclaves or liquid disinfectants."

When it comes to pedicure bowls, tabletops and the like, which can't fit into autoclaves, the EPA/DIN-registered disinfectants are the go-to formulas, and Bryson also states that paper or foam-backed nail files, orangewood sticks and other porous items can't be put into disinfectants so may only be used on one client, then disposed.

3. License to file. While different states have varying rules on posting cosmetology licenses, in general that important piece of paper should be in your line of sight when you take a seat in the salon. "Look to see that the license is current. While it may be a few days out of expiration and they are in the process, glaring time delays are not acceptable," says Masterson.

Fricke notes that she was stunned at the number of applicants who failed the test for their license when she took the exam. "The day I took the test there were maybe 50 of us," she recalls. "They give the test in a different language every day. You can take it in your native language. Three of us passed the test that day. That scared me so badly. It's not rocket science."



Always make sure that your manicurist uses sterilized tools and equipment. Photo: Alamy

4. Beware of health risks. What might appear to be a little prick or slip of the cuticle nipper shouldn't be cast aside lightly. If your manicurist hasn't properly sterilized his or her equipment, infections become serious business.

"There are reports of staphylococcus, herpetic whitlow (a herpes infection of the skin), nail **fungus**, and in the case of foot spas, also mycobacterial lesions," says Bryson. "There's even been a few deaths."

In 2005, **Paula Abdul** campaigned for better manicure hygiene after falling victim to a nail shop that didn't meet proper health standards. Abdul admitted the infection she developed was so painful that the slightest brush against the affected area was excruciatingly painful, driving her to campaign for the passing of a bill that would mandate that California salons get serious about their health and safety policies.

Dermatologist Marta Rendon, based in Boca Raton, Fla., says that if infections in the nail bed are not treated properly, they can lead to **scarring** and abnormal nail growth. "Some can be serious and become systemic," she explains. "The time the infection may take to heal depends on the type of infection. If it's bacterial or viral, it could be one or two weeks. If a deep **fungal infection** occurs, it could take up to six weeks or longer."

Rendon recommends heading to a doctor if you notice any redness, swelling or blisters or experience pain.

5. Pampering is pleasant, not painful. Christy Cook, a nail educator for the **Association of Cosmetology Salon Professionals**, wants to make it clear that your **manicure** should not hurt, and if it does, something is seriously wrong.

"As far as taking care of the nail, any aggressive filing or pushing back of the **cuticle** should not hurt at all," says Cook. "It should not be a painful process. If they're causing you pain or if they cannot even communicate with you, then you definitely have a problem."

In fact, cutting of the cuticle isn't often necessary.

"When you are taking care of the **cuticle**, the cuticle is the skin's barrier for infection control for the rest of the body," says Cook. "It's not necessary to clip a cuticle every single time that you do a manicure. Normally, if it's hanging, it's when you do need to nip that area that's giving you some problems. But if it's all intact, then it's not necessary. Depending on the state that you're in, it's against their rules to clip cuticles so you'll have to check with the state board to check what they're allowed to do."

Fricke offers her method for nail care.

"The second misnomer is pushing the cuticle back," says Fricke. "What you're really trying to do is clear the cuticle and skin from the surface of the nail. You're not actually trying to push it back. If you're pushing back hard, then you're likely going to be damaging it. I tend to buff over the top of the nail, including cuticles, and for biters and pickers, I just buff over the chunks they've been chewing on. It will take away the light, frosty stuff and pick up the stuff that actually can be trapped. So I buff and then I scrub with a nailbrush. That really will take care of 80 to 90 percent of what actually needs to happen there."

6. One final red flag. A sign that a nail shop is one you may want to skip, according to Fricke, is a cash-only establishment.

"If they only take cash, then you can't prove that you were there and you can't prove that they're the ones that did that to you (if you get an infection) because there's no record," explains the Los Angeles-based manicurist.



Don't be afraid to ask questions before choosing your nail shade. Photo: Alamy

Overall however, consumers really just need to use their best judgment. If a salon or shop doesn't look clean from the outside, then it's fairly safe to say it doesn't get any better once you're behind the scenes.