

8 Things You Should Know Before Getting a Gel Manicure

The long-lasting, mega-watt shine of a gel mani is in high demand. But is it safe? Does it destroy your nails? Here's what our experts want you to know.

BY LINDSAY COHN

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The upside of gel polish



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One of the reasons gel manis are so popular is how long they last! "The efficacy of a gel is based on how well the product goes on, its durability and how easily it can be removed," says Kallens. Most salons will guarantee no chips for a week, but if applied properly, they can last up to three! Unlike regular polish, which can chip after two to three days (unless you take these steps to make them last longer), they're borderline indestructible, which makes them ideal for weddings, special occasions, and vacations. The question is only whether your health pays a price.

Be wary of UV light



ISTOCK/MOUSTACHEGIRL

The application of gel is not totally different from the application of a traditional polish, with the exception of the curing process under the UV-emitting lamps, according to Chris G. Adigun, MD, Board Certified Dermatologist and Nail Specialist at the Dermatology & Laser Center of Chapel Hill. And therein lies the potential problem. "These lamps are not to be underestimated, even though the exposure times are brief," Dr. Adigun says. "They are very powerful and are emitting UVA rays far more powerful than those emitted by the sun." She recommends purchasing a UVA-blocking sleeve, such as the YouVeeShield, and bringing it to the nail salon to wear while your gel polish is curing. LED lights are actually no safer than traditional fluorescent UV lamps. In fact, according to Dr. Adigun, they emit exponentially more powerful UVA rays, which is why the curing times are shorter. Forgetting your hands is one of the sunscreen mistakes we all make.

Know how nails get damaged



ISTOCK/GILAXIA

It's not just the UV light that's potentially damaging. While an experienced nail tech will always make sure the correct lamp is used with the proprietary gel polish for the recommended amount of time, it's easy to mess up the steps. "Any alteration in these variables can lead to polish that is over-cured to the nail plate that becomes very difficult to remove," explains Dr. Adigun. "A properly applied gel should literally 'float' off the nail with the acetone soak. However, when a gel is not properly cured, it will not come off, and needs to be manually chipped off, which is very traumatizing to the nail plate." Find out the 16 things your manicurist is secretly thinking about you.

Gel manis *can* weaken your nails...but it's mostly due to the removal process



ISTOCK/BEEMORE

There is evidence to suggest that the gel manicure process can lead to dehydration and thinning of the nail plate. "In one study, nail plate thickness was measured both before and after a gel manicure, and thinning of the nail was observed," notes Dr. Adigun. The most important thing to keep in mind when getting a gel manicure is that the removal process is one of, if not the most damaging part of the entire experience, according to Ruth Kallens, founder and partner of Van Court in NYC. (Here's how to do everyday things and not ruin your nails.)

There are gentle ways to remove gel polish



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Removing gel polish doesn't have to mean complete nail destruction. For the most part, soft gels can all be removed with an acetone soak-off process. "For seamless removal, make sure the gel is buffed off the top of the nail. Not all of it should be removed, but much of the surface should be compromised, so the acetone can work," says Kallens. Next, place a small piece of acetone-soaked cotton and cover with tin foil. Pro tip: Placing nails into a nitrile glove will speed up the process. After 7 to 10 minutes, gel should be crinkling up. Finally, take a cuticle pushing stick and gently push back the debris.

Certain polish formulas are safer than others



ISTOCK/BELYJMISHKA

Kallens suggests a gel that is at least 5-free—which means it's formulated without toxic substances, specifically toluene, dibutyl phthalate (DBP), formaldehyde, formaldehyde resin, and camphor—like Bio Seaweed Gel and Madam Glam. Plus, they're available in a rainbow of hues! Having trouble choosing a color? Find out what your polish shade reveals about you.

It's possible to go too often



ISTOCK/SKYNESHER

"At Van Court, we take an 'everything in moderation' approach to gel manicures" says Kallens, who recommends receiving no more than two gel manicures back-to-back. According to Dr. Adigun, it's absolutely fine to get gel manicures every once in awhile. "I simply recommend to my patients that they take gel manicure detoxes intermittently to allow their nails to rehydrate and repair." (These are 11 of the craziest things manicurists and hairdressers have ever seen).

You have to rehab your nails post-gel



ISTOCK/GILAXIA

"Once you do remove the gel polish, make sure you moisturize with deep penetrating oils and balms," says Kallens. This will help repair any damage and strengthen nails. Don't miss the 10 surprisingly easy ways to grow strong, beautiful nails.