

HOME>HEALTH

How To Battle Nail Biting in the Salon

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Nail biting affects up to 30% of the population.

When a client arrives at the salon with an obvious nail biting habit, it's enough to make any tech cringe. According to Dana Stern, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York City and founder and CEO of Dr. Dana Beauty, nail biting, or onychophagia, affects up to 30 percent of the general population. Patients are often embarrassed to seek medical help for nail biting, says Stern, so it's no wonder why techs see so much of this common condition in the salon. Here, a look at the causes and symptoms of nail biting, plus treatments to help your clients break this bad habit.

Bite Marks

While many people picture nail biters as nervous or stressed, that's not necessarily the case. "The exact cause of nail biting is currently unknown, but some studies have shown that nail biting may be more common with certain psychiatric disorders, such as anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder," says Stern. "Nail biting has also been shown to be associated with boredom or a lull in activity."

For clients who bite their nails, the symptoms are easy to spot: Nails tend to be abnormally short and uneven, cuticles may be absent or ragged, nail folds may be in varying stages of healing and splinter hemorrhages (longitudinal black thin lines in the nail that look like splinters) are often present, says Stern.

Nail biting can also lead to other complications, including paronychia (inflammation and/or infection of the skin surrounding the nail); herpetic whitlow (the spread of the herpes simplex virus to the fingers); or longitudinal melanonychia (damage at the base of the nail, caused by excessive biting, stimulates the melanocytes, or melanin-producing cells, resulting in vertical bands of dark pigment on the nail bed). In some cases, nail biting can also result in oral or dental complications.

Salon Solutions

If you have a client who's a nail biter, applying short enhancements can help break the habit. Janet McCormick, owner of Nailcare Academy in Fort Myers, Florida, suggests a weekly manicure regimen and enhancements until the natural nail grows past the free edge. According to McCormick, nail biters often have small, moist nail beds, so acrylic is more prone to lifting; she recommends gel enhancements for more flexibility. Additionally, a squoval or round shape helps prevent biting, she says, since there are no sharp corners begging to be bitten. "I send clients home with a small emery board [with instructions to] keep it on hand at all times so they aren't tempted to bite at a ragged corner," says McCormick, adding that she also inquires about when a client is apt to bite, helping to draw attention to her triggers.

"I recommend that my patients keep a diary for several days to get a sense of when they are biting their nails and to see if there is a stimulus, such as stress or boredom," says Stern. "That way, they can initiate habit reversal by having a competing response ready when they are most likely to engage in the habit." For example, if an individual feels the urge to bite, they should instead reach for something else to occupy their hands, like a stress ball, rubber band or fidget spinner.

Other possible treatment options for clients include wearing a discrete accessory, such as a wristband, as a reminder to stop biting nails or using nail polish that contains unpleasant tasting compounds designed to discourage nail biting. (Note: If nail biting is a common issue in your salon, you may want to consider retailing products that help deter the habit.)

Keep in mind, bad habits are hard to break. Don't be discouraged if a client returns for her next appointment with half of her enhancements gnawed to tiny nibs. Instead, praise your client's healthy looking nails, and continue to provide stellar services and a *lot* of encouragement. —Tracy Morin is a freelance writer and editor based in Oxford, MS.