Beyond the Polish: Recognizing Nail Disorders in Your Practice

As nail technicians, we do far more than apply color and shape edges. We are often the first professional to notice changes in a client's nail health — changes that can signal underlying conditions ranging from minor trauma to serious systemic illness. This course will equip you with the knowledge to recognize what you see, understand its significance, and respond with professionalism and care.

NAIL TECHNOLOGY COURSE | SKIN & NAIL HEALTH



The Foundation: What a Healthy Nail Looks Like

Before you can recognize what's wrong, you must first have a crystal-clear picture of what's right. A healthy nail is your baseline — the standard against which all variations and abnormalities are measured. Knowing the hallmarks of nail health allows you to quickly identify when something appears "off" during a client consultation or service.

Texture & Flexibility

A healthy nail plate is firm yet has a slight natural flexibility. It should not crack or bend easily under normal pressure. The surface is smooth and shiny without visible ridges, pits, or splits that run along or across the plate.

Color & Translucency

The nail plate itself is whitish and translucent, allowing the pinkish hue of the nail bed beneath to show through. This pink tone is a sign of healthy circulation. The lunula — the half-moon at the base — is typically a pale, opaque white.

Structure & Attachment

The nail plate adheres firmly to the nail bed with no lifting, separation, or gaps. The surrounding skin — the cuticle, sidewalls, and hyponychium — is intact, unbroken, and free from redness, swelling, or signs of irritation.

ⓘ A healthy nail grows approximately 3–4mm per month on average. Slower growth or changes in growth rate can sometimes signal nutritional deficiencies or health changes worth noting.

When Things Go Wrong: Understanding Nail Disorders

A nail disorder is defined as any condition caused by injury, disease, or dysfunction within the nail unit — which includes the nail plate, nail bed, matrix, cuticle, and surrounding skin structures. Disorders can originate from external trauma, systemic illness, nutritional deficiencies, infections, or chronic skin conditions.

Why This Matters in Your Practice

As nail technicians, you occupy a uniquely powerful position. You examine your clients' nails up close, often on a regular basis, which means you may notice changes before the client even becomes aware of them. You are, in many ways, the first line of defense in identifying potential nail and skin health issues. This is not about playing doctor — it is about being observant, informed, and responsible.

Recognizing when something looks abnormal and knowing how to respond is a core professional competency. It protects your client, protects your other clients, and protects your business.

The Nail Technician's Scope

It is critical to understand the distinction between **recognition** and **diagnosis**. Your role is to observe and note — not to identify, label, or treat medical conditions. You are trained in beauty services, not medicine. When something looks irregular, your job is to:

- Pause and assess whether the condition is contagious or could be worsened by service
- Communicate with your client in a calm, non-alarmist way
- Decline service if there is any risk of spreading infection
- Recommend that the client consult a licensed healthcare professional

Common Nail Disorders: Visual Clues

The following disorders are among the most frequently encountered in a nail salon setting. Each one has distinct visual characteristics that, once learned, become recognizable at a glance. Study each carefully — your ability to recognize these patterns is what allows you to respond appropriately.

🟣 Bruised Nails (Subungual Hematoma)

Bruised nails result from blood clots forming beneath the nail plate, usually following a blunt impact or crush injury — dropping something heavy, closing a finger in a door, or repetitive pressure from ill-fitting footwear. They appear as dark, purplish, reddish-brown, or nearly black spots beneath the nail. The discoloration follows the shape of the trauma. In most cases, bruised nails are not a contraindication for service unless the nail is severely damaged, lifted, or causing the client pain. Services should be approached gently and with client consent.

〰️ Beau′s Lines

Beau′s Lines are horizontal depressions or grooves that run across the nail plate from one side to the other. They form when nail growth is temporarily interrupted at the matrix level — the growing zone at the base of the nail. This interruption is commonly triggered by major illness (high fever, chemotherapy, severe infection), significant physical trauma, or extreme nutritional deficiency. Because nails grow at a known rate, the position of the line on the nail can help estimate when the disruption occurred. These lines are a signal worth noting — encourage clients to discuss them with their doctor.

🥚 Eggshell Nails

Eggshell nails are characterized by an unusually thin, white, and excessively flexible nail plate. The nails are fragile and may curve over the free edge in a downward arc. This condition is often associated with chronic illness, poor nutrition, nervous system disorders, or prolonged medication use. These nails require extremely gentle handling. Aggressive filing, pushing, or the use of strong chemicals can cause breakage or further damage. Adapt your service techniques accordingly and avoid any procedures that place stress on the plate.

More Nail Disorders: Texture and Shape Changes

Changes in the texture, surface quality, and physical shape of the nail are among the most informative visual cues available to a nail technician. These alterations often reflect what is happening at the matrix level — the tissue responsible for generating new nail cells. Understanding what causes these changes helps you contextualize what you observe and communicate it clearly to your clients.



Onychorrhexis (Brittle, Split Nails)

Onychorrhexis presents as brittle nails with longitudinal ridges running lengthwise from base to tip, often accompanied by splitting at the free edge. The nail may feel rough to the touch and break unevenly. It is commonly caused by injury to the nail matrix, repeated exposure to water and chemicals, nutritional deficiencies (particularly iron, biotin, or protein), excessive use of nail polish remover, or underlying health conditions such as hypothyroidism or anemia. Technicians should avoid aggressive filing and recommend protective base coats. Encourage clients to hydrate their nails and cuticles regularly with appropriate oils.



Plicatured Nails (Folded or Tile Nails)

Plicatured nails, sometimes called tile nails or folded nails, are characterized by a nail plate that curves sharply along one or both sides, creating a tube-like or folded appearance. This extreme curvature can exert pressure on the surrounding tissue and frequently leads to ingrown nails, particularly on the toes. The condition may be hereditary or result from ill-fitting footwear and prolonged external pressure. Services must be approached with great care — improper cutting or shaping can worsen the curvature or cause trauma to the lateral folds. Refer clients with recurring ingrown nails to a podiatrist.



Vertical Ridges

Vertical ridges run lengthwise along the nail plate, from the cuticle to the free edge. These fine, parallel lines are extremely common and are considered a normal part of the aging process — the nail matrix becomes less uniform in its cell production over time. However, prominent ridging in younger clients can sometimes indicate nutritional deficiencies, dehydration, or systemic health concerns. When buffing a client's nails, take care not to over-buff ridged nails, as excessive buffing thins the plate. Use a gentle multi-step buffer and educate clients on the importance of nail hydration.

Discoloration and Pigmentation: What Colors Tell Us

Nail color is one of the most immediate and informative indicators of nail health. While many discolorations are harmless — the result of staining from polish, food, or environmental exposure — others can point to circulatory issues, systemic disorders, or pigmentary changes that warrant a medical evaluation. Learning to differentiate between benign and potentially significant discoloration is a key observational skill.

Discolored Nails: Reading the Palette

Nail discoloration covers a wide spectrum of colors, each with its own set of potential causes:

- **Yellow:** Most commonly caused by prolonged use of dark nail polish without a base coat, but can also indicate fungal infection, psoriasis, or respiratory conditions (Yellow Nail Syndrome).
- **White spots or patches (Leukonychia):** Often due to minor trauma to the matrix. Generally harmless and grows out over time.
- **Blue or purple tones:** Can signal poor circulation, cold exposure, or in some cases cardiovascular concerns. Worth noting if persistent.
- **Pale or whitish nail beds:** May indicate anemia or low blood pressure.
- **Green:** Often a sign of bacterial infection, particularly Pseudomonas, which thrives beneath lifted nail enhancements.

Surface staining from polish or chemicals can usually be buffed or grown out. Any discoloration that appears to originate beneath the plate, persists, or is accompanied by other symptoms should be referred to a physician.

Melanonychia: The Dark Band

Melanonychia refers to the presence of a black or brown band or streak running lengthwise within the nail plate. It is caused by increased activity of melanocytes — the pigment-producing cells located in the nail matrix. This increased pigmentation may be:

- **Ethnic or racial in origin:** Very common and entirely normal in individuals with darker skin tones. Multiple nails are often affected symmetrically.
- **Caused by trauma:** Repeated friction or injury can stimulate localized melanocyte activity.
- **Associated with medications:** Certain drugs, including some antimalarials and chemotherapy agents, can cause pigmentary changes.
- **A potential indicator of melanoma:** A dark band that is new, widening, irregular in color, or accompanied by pigment spreading into the surrounding skin (Hutchinson's sign) must be evaluated by a dermatologist without delay.

⚠ Never dismiss a new or changing dark nail band. While often benign, subungual melanoma is a serious condition that is far more treatable when caught early. Always refer.

The Danger Zone: Identifying Infections

Infections of the nail and surrounding skin represent the clearest and most non-negotiable contraindication in nail services. Unlike many of the disorders discussed so far — which may simply require adapted technique or a referral — infections require an immediate halt to service. Understanding the visual signs, the biology of these infections, and the risks they pose is essential for every practicing nail technician.

🦠 Bacterial Infections (Paronychia / Pseudomonas)

Bacterial nail infections most often present as a yellow-green discoloration beneath the nail plate — a color that darkens over time as the infection progresses, sometimes turning green, brown, or nearly black. This is frequently caused by *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, a bacteria that thrives in the moist, warm environment beneath a lifted nail enhancement or a naturally separated nail plate.

Other bacterial presentations include **acute paronychia** — a rapid-onset infection of the skin fold surrounding the nail, characterized by redness, swelling, heat, tenderness, and the presence of pus. This is often caused by *Staphylococcus aureus* and may follow a cut, torn cuticle, or nail-biting injury.

Under no circumstances should services be performed on a client with a suspected bacterial infection. Proceeding with a service risks spreading the infection to other nails, cross-contaminating tools, and potentially worsening the client's condition. Advise the client to see a physician immediately.

🍄 Fungal Infections (Onychomycosis)

Onychomycosis is the medical term for fungal infection of the nail — one of the most common nail disorders encountered in salon settings, estimated to affect up to 10% of the general population. It is caused by dermatophytes, yeasts, or molds that invade the nail plate and bed.

Visual signs include: thickened, brittle, and discolored nails (yellow, brown, or white); a crumbly or chalky texture; a foul odor; nail plate that separates from the bed (onycholysis); and debris accumulating beneath the plate. The infection typically begins at the free edge or lateral nail fold and progresses inward.

Fungal infections thrive in dark, warm, moist environments — making shoes, gym locker rooms, nail salons with inadequate sanitation, and water-softened nails prime breeding grounds. **Never perform services on nails you suspect are fungally infected.** Fungal spores can survive on tools and surfaces, putting every subsequent client at risk. Proper sanitation of all implements between clients is your frontline defense.

⊗ Remember: Bacterial and fungal infections are contagious. Your tools, files, buffers, and workstation surfaces can carry and transfer pathogens. Single-use files and proper disinfection protocols are non-negotiable professional standards.

Why Spotting Is Crucial — But Diagnosis Isn't Your Role

There is a critical and important distinction that every nail technician must internalize: **observation is professional responsibility; diagnosis is medical practice.** Understanding this boundary does not limit your value — it defines it. Your role is uniquely powerful precisely because you are positioned to observe, note, and refer — before a client's condition has a chance to worsen.

1 Client Safety and Infection Control

Identifying conditions that are contagious — such as bacterial or fungal infections — protects not only your client but every person who sits in your chair afterward. A single infected client whose condition goes unnoticed can expose tools, surfaces, and other clients to pathogens. Your awareness is the barrier between a contained issue and a preventable outbreak within your salon.

2 Early Detection That Can Change Outcomes

Conditions like Beau's Lines or Melanonychia may be the first visible indication of a serious underlying health issue — a recovering illness, a systemic disorder, or in rare cases, early-stage cancer. Many clients do not closely examine their own nails between appointments. Your trained eye may be the first to catch something that prompts them to seek medical care. Early detection saves lives, and that is not an exaggeration.

3 Maintaining Professional Boundaries and Legal Protection

Diagnosing a nail or skin condition — even informally saying "I think that looks like a fungal infection" — places you outside your scope of practice and opens you to significant professional and legal liability. Your role is to describe what you observe objectively, express concern without alarm, and recommend the client seek evaluation from a licensed physician or dermatologist. This protects both your client and your professional standing.

Red Flags: When to Refer to a Doctor

Knowing when to pause a service and direct a client to medical care is one of the most important skills you will develop as a nail professional. The following signs should always prompt a conversation — and in many cases, a refusal of service until the client has received medical clearance. Approaching this conversation with compassion and professionalism ensures your client feels cared for, not rejected.

1

Persistent Discoloration or Dark Bands

Any dark streak, band, or discoloration that is new, growing, or changing in appearance — particularly Melanonychia that was not previously present — should be evaluated by a dermatologist. Do not attempt to hide or cover it with polish. Refer promptly.

2

Deep Grooves or Significant Texture Changes

Pronounced Beau's Lines or severe Onychorrhexis that cannot be explained by simple external causes may signal systemic illness or nutritional deficiency. Encourage the client to discuss these findings with their physician, particularly if the changes are new or progressing.

3

Signs of Active Infection

Yellow-green discoloration beneath the plate, swelling or redness around the nail fold, pus, heat, or foul odor are all signs of active infection. **Refuse service immediately and gently advise the client to seek medical treatment.** Do not attempt to clean, file, or service around an infected nail.

4

Any Condition Causing Pain or Unexplained Change

Pain during what should be a routine service, unexplained changes in nail shape (particularly rapid onset), or any condition that simply looks unlike anything you've been trained to recognize — when in doubt, refer out. There is no professional downside to erring on the side of caution. A client who is referred and receives a clean bill of health will appreciate your attentiveness. A client whose condition worsens due to neglect is a far graver concern.

> *"When in doubt, refer out."* — The guiding principle of every responsible nail professional. Your job is to enhance beauty safely, not to take medical risks with your clients' health.

Your Role: Enhancing Beauty, Ensuring Safety

You have now built a foundational understanding of the nail disorders and conditions you may encounter in your professional practice. This knowledge transforms you from a technician into a truly informed and responsible beauty professional — someone whose value to clients extends far beyond the quality of their application or the precision of their shaping.

👁️ Stay Observant

Make a visual assessment of your client's nails and surrounding skin a standard part of every consultation. Look before you apply product. Note changes from previous appointments. Your consistent attention is your most powerful professional tool.

🛡️ Prioritize Safety Always

Never perform a service on a nail or skin condition that poses a risk of spreading infection, causing harm, or masking a potentially serious condition. A service declined today protects your client's health and your professional reputation for the long term.

🤝 Maintain Professional Boundaries

Describe what you observe. Express concern with compassion. Recommend professional medical evaluation. Never diagnose, speculate beyond your training, or minimize a client's concern. You are a partner in their wellbeing, not a clinician.

📚 Keep Learning

Dermatology and nail health science continue to evolve. Continuing education, trade publications, and collaboration with healthcare professionals in your community will keep your knowledge current and your practice exceptional.

Your keen eye, professional judgment, and genuine care for your clients' well-being can make a meaningful difference in their health outcomes. Beauty and safety are not in conflict — in the hands of a trained, observant professional, they are the same thing.