

NAIL ART HORROR

Infections and skin problems aside, just touching your eyelid with an acrylic nail can cause an allergic reaction. JOAN CHEW reports

It is not even Halloween and you suddenly find yourself with green fingernails.

What to point your finger at? Why, those acrylic falsies you got glued on that are supposed to give you decorated digits.

It turns out that those artificial nails or gel overlays can cause infections, allergies and other ailments.

Ms Victoria Koh, owner of Flair Nails & Beauty Services in Holland Grove Road, explains that acrylic nails are made from a paste composed of a powdered polymer and a liquid monomer that are applied onto real nails.

This hardens within minutes, extending beyond the natural nails and adding length to them.

Doctors say the number of women seeking treatment for nail problems is rising as a result of this desire for perfect, but fake nails.

The roll-call of horror includes brittle nails, allergic contact dermatitis, fungal nail infections and onycholysis, a condition in which the nail plate is lifted from its bed.

Dr Eileen Tan, dermatologist and owner of Eileen Tan Skin, Laser and Hair Transplant Clinic at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, now sees one to two cases of allergic contact dermatitis or fungal nail infection a month, up from just one case in four months previously.

Allergic contact dermatitis is the body's reaction to foreign material in contact with the skin, which becomes itchy, red and scaly.

A fungal nail infection occurs when a fungus attacks a fingernail, toenail or the skin under the nail called the nail bed.

Dr Lee Haur Yueh, associate consultant at Singapore General Hospital's department of dermatology, says the women who seek help are mostly in their 20s to 40s.

Ms Koh, who set up her nail salon five years ago, tried acrylic nails once and regretted it.

The 35-year-old lasted one week with the acrylic glue-ons, which she found uncomfortable.

For the next six months, her nails became brittle and "paper-thin", and could even be folded over when they grew long. They also began chipping easily.

"I had to cut them each time they grew slightly long and it was irritating," she said.

After the experience, she now tries to discourage her customers from asking for acrylic nails.

Dr Regina Lim, consultant at the department of dermatology at Changi General Hospital, says the chemicals used in some fake nails, such as acrylates or formaldehyde resins, are allergens that can irritate or cause eczema to the surrounding nail folds.

Just touching your eyelid with an acrylic nail can also cause allergic contact dermatitis.

Dr Tan adds: "Any gap between the acrylic nail and the natural nail is a possible reservoir for fungal or bacterial infection."

Moisture and debris inside this gap may cause infection.

Dr Lim says: "As these nails may be worn for a long time, the infection may not be obvious under the acrylic nails until the natural nail has become very infected."

The infected natural nails may look white or yellow initially, then become more discoloured, crumbly, thickened and misshapened.

Dr Lim advises consumers to check on their nail parlour's hygiene practices, as improper sterilisation of tools can result in cross contamination.

Dr Lee of SGH says the cosmetic procedures used in nail parlours may also cause trauma to the nail structure.

"Soaking the nails in water, pushing back the cuticle and filing the surface of the nail to fit the artificial nails may weaken the natural nails' structure, making them susceptible to physical damage and infections," he adds.

He says that the manicurist should not file the surface of the nail plate excessively.

While there are those who have no problem using acrylic nails, Dr Tan cautions that long-term wear, say, for three months or longer, "may hamper proper and natural nail growth".

However, public relations consultant Louann Wong, 26, is not perturbed by the fungal infection she got two years ago from the use of acrylic nails, which made her own nails greenish and uneven.

She says: "This is the price you pay for beauty. If I rely on my natural nails, they will not grow long beautifully."

ST PHOTOS: MARYANNE TAN

PROBLEMS ACRYLIC NAILS CAN CAUSE

ALLERGIC CONTACT DERMATITIS

Cause: The body is allergic to chemicals in the acrylic nails such as acrylates and formaldehyde-based resins.

Symptoms: Skin becomes inflamed and is itchy, red and scaly.

Treatment: A patch test confirms if someone is allergic to these chemicals. The inflammation can be treated with creams such as those with steroids and those that have a moisturising effect.

BRITTLE NAILS

Cause: Solvents used for removing artificial nails, such as acetone, dry up the natural nail.

Symptoms: Nails are left brittle, dull and easily chipped.

Treatment: Moisturise your nails with hand cream immediately after removing the acrylic nails. Use gloves when handling chemicals like detergents, which cause nails to dry out further.

FUNGAL NAIL INFECTION

Cause: Various fungi can infect fingernails and toenails directly, or spread from surrounding infected skin.

Symptoms: Nails are discoloured, change shape, crumble, thicken and debris gets trapped under them.

Treatment: The infection is treated with anti-fungal nail paint or oral anti-fungal medication, which usually has to be taken over a few months.

ONYCHOLYSIS

Cause: Contact irritants, trauma and trapped moisture, often linked to an internal disorder such as nail fungi.

Symptoms: Loosening of the exposed portion of the nail from the nail bed, usually beginning at the free edge and continuing to the lunula, the pale area at the base of the fingernail.

Treatment: Avoid using artificial nails to reduce the chance of trauma on the natural nails.

Sources: Dr Joyce Lee, consultant dermatologist at National Skin Centre; Dr Regina Lim, consultant at the department of dermatology at Changi General Hospital

joanchew@sph.com.sg