Dear Alice:

I am curious as to whether the nail bed regenerates or not. I used to bite my nails, and slowly I've bitten off some of the nail bed as well, on all ten fingers. It has been two years, and the nail bed does not seem to grow back, and my nails grow according to the new shape of the nail bed. It makes my hands look somewhat ugly, to be honest.

Any suggestions would be appreciated.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Nail biting (known in some circles as onychophagia) is most common among adolescents. Approximately 45 percent of teens bite their nails. While some grow out of it, plenty of adults do it, too. Here's a fun fact: About 15 percent of nail biters are rumored to be toenail biters, too! The answer to your question about whether or not the damage to the nail bed has permanently changed your nails is uncertain. A visit to a health care provider may be in order to fully assess the damage and possible treatments for your nails. As you continue on your streak of unbitten nails, there are a few additional self-care actions you can take to improve your nail health.

There are many theories about why some people feel the urge to bite their nails. The Freudian viewpoint that nail biting is rooted in oral fixation no longer predominates. Some think it may be related to anxiety or compulsion. Many others think it's an example of over-grooming, a behavior found in many other primates. While it has no severe or long-term health consequences, it can result in unsightly nails, which may affect other aspects of a person's life.

In the meantime, here are some general nail care tips:

- **Moisturize your nails.** Just like skin, nails get dry and need moisturizer. Regular hand lotion works just as well on nails as hands. After all, nails are made of keratin, the same fibrous protein that makes up the top layer of skin.
- **Keep nails clean.** It not only looks nice, it also keeps nails and the areas surrounding them healthy. Clean nails are less likely to fall victim to fungal infections. Additionally, having nail bed injuries makes your nails slightly more prone to bacterial infection. So keep 'em clean.
- **File or trim nails regularly.** Regular nail length maintenance also helps stave off
infection. For toenails, this is particularly important.

- **Wear shoes that fit.** Shoes that are too small can cause toenail injuries and ingrown nails.
- **Don't remove your cuticles or your hang nails.** Some nail grooming techniques may call for this, but not only does it hurt, it is also bad for your nails. Cuticles help keep bacteria out of your nail bed. Hang nails should be clipped (not torn) off to avoid removing healthy tissue.
- **Avoid biting nails.** This is the one you've managed to stop.

Kudos to you for quitting that last one. Kicking nail-biting habits can be tricky. For readers who still may be trying to do just that, here are some strategies:

- **Notice your triggers.** What causes you to start nipping at your nails? For some, it's focusing or concentrating on work, while for others, it's sitting back to watch a movie. Some people find it comforting and do it when they feel anxious, while others do it for no apparent reason at all. Noticing when or why you bite your nails can give you good information about what might help you quit.
- **Have an alternative outlet.** Whether it's a conscious habit or not, replacing it with something can be more effective than quitting cold turkey. Many people find squeezing those squishy stress balls to be a good substitute. Others find doodling or fidgeting with some other item to be useful. Usually things that keep your hands busy. But if you find yourself yearning for something to chew on, keep toothpicks or gum around for those moments.
- **Operant conditioning.** If all else fails, the most sensationalized method involves conditioning yourself to leave your nails alone by forming a negative association with biting them. Most people do this by painting their nails with a type of polish that has either a bitter or very spicy ingredient in it. The unpleasant taste is meant to encourage you to eventually kick the habit.

Whatever you try, it may be beneficial to see a health care provider if you are unhappy with or concerned about your nail appearance. Whether it's a cosmetic issue, health issue, or both, your nails will thank you for paying attention.

Happy scratching,

Alice!

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