

Beyond Buffing

Getting your nails in shape requires more than polish — you might also need a bit of luck.

BY DR. MELISSA SCHWARZSCHILD

Spring is in the air. It's time to toss the boots you've been wearing for months and slide into a pair of strappy sandals. A little pampering of your hands and feet may be in order. But there's more to a good manicure and pedicure than finding the perfect shade of nail polish.

Let's start with manicures. You know the drill — your hands soak in warm, sudsy water before the manicurist starts her work. She pushes the cuticle back with a metal tool, then uses a clipper to remove bits of cuticle. Next, she takes an emery board to file your nails and then shines them with a buffer. As a bonus, you get a wonderfully relaxing hand massage. Finally, polish is applied and — *voilà!* — your nails look fabulous and you're ready to conquer the world — or at least your next big social event.

What you may not realize is that this harmless indulgence could expose you to bacterial, fungal and even viral infections. All metal implements used in the manicure should be sterilized after every use to remove any potential harmful infective agents. If they're not properly sterilized, they can spread infections from one client to another. Staph bacteria, fungus and even infectious hepatitis can potentially be transmitted through nicks in the skin. Non-metal devices such as emery boards and buffers should be brand-new for each client because contaminated tools can transmit viruses such as warts.

Soaking your feet in a warm whirlpool footbath while you relax in a comfy massage chair is close to sublime, but pedicures are potentially even more dangerous than manicures. Recent outbreaks of bacterial infections from contaminated whirlpool

water have been reported in several states. In these cases, a high percentage of women had shaved their legs within 24 hours of having a pedicure (shaving increases the risk of infectious transmission; nicks allow the infectious agent to enter easily). A whopping 30 percent of salon whirlpools in California (one of the states with reported outbreaks) were found to harbor dangerous bacteria.

The good news is that foot spas are now being made so that they don't recirculate water, making it more difficult for bacteria to grow. In salons where older models are used, the spas should be cleaned with bleach or hospital disinfectant between every client.

You can also take a few precautionary steps: Make sure your salon is licensed. Wash your hands prior to your manicure. Ask about sterilization and sanitation techniques. Make sure that emery boards and buffers have not been previously used (or bring your own). Finally, don't shave your legs within 48 hours of having a pedicure.

There's no reason to skip your "me time" altogether — just ask a few questions first. And then you'll be ready to show off those toes.



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