

# Prevention

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## How to Grow Stronger, Healthier Nails, According to Dermatologists



Weak nails are a total buzzkill. But as tempting as it is to hide your thin and peeling nails under a permanent gel manicure, there are plenty of lifestyle tweaks that, collectively, can bring your nails back to their former glory. So, what causes our nails to weaken in the first place? “Our nails are made up of layers of keratin, a protein that’s also found in our hair and skin,” says Rhonda Klein, MD, a board-certified dermatologist in Westport, Connecticut. “As we age, the cells in our bodies produce keratin at a slower rate, which can cause the nails to weaken and appear dry and dull.”

It’s not just the aging process that can do a number on our nails, though, she adds. Exposure to elements (think: extreme cold, excessive hand-washing,

contact with chemicals) can all deplete the nails, leaving them dry and vulnerable.

Fortunately, that also means much of what it takes to strengthen your nails is (literally) in your hands—and here's exactly how to make it happen, according to doctors:

How to strengthen your nails (and keep them that way)

1. Moisturize your hands and nails regularly.

L'Occitane Nourishing Nail & Cuticle Oil

amazon.com

\$19.00

Frequently moisturizing your nails and the surrounding skin with a hand cream can prevent further impairment of the integrity of the nails, says Philadelphia-based dermatologist Rina Allawh, MD. Ointments, such as Aquaphor Healing Ointment and Vaniply Skin Protectant, pull a double-duty by nourishing your nails and protecting them from future damage by locking in moisture.

Cuticle oil helps to repair, nourish, and moisturize weak nails as well, says North Carolina-based board-certified dermatologist Sheel Desai Solomon, MD. "I recommend L'Occitane Shea Nourishing Nail & Cuticle Oil," she says. "It's formulated with a high concentration of shea oil (30 percent) to help soften cuticles and nourish nails."

2. Keep them on the shorter side.

"If you're having trouble with weak nails, consider cutting down the length while you build up their strength," suggests Dr. Solomon. "Shorter nails are less prone to breaking because there are fewer exposed edges to tear, and less surface area where water and chemicals can be absorbed." Once trimmed, prevent snags by gently rounding the edges with a nail file.

3. Become a nail filing master.

Go with a soft nail file to keep the edges of your nails smooth, says Dr. Klein. With rougher grains, you run the risk of making tears in the nail, which can lead to peeling and hangnails.

File your nails in one direction, using long and swift (but gentle) strokes. "Back and forth see-saw motions will cause the nail to splinter," says Dr. Solomon,

who recommends using the Deborah Lippmann Smooth Operator 4-Way Nail Buffer. “The micro-fiber material it’s made from is very gentle on the nails, but still manages to achieve a clean shape,” she says.

#### 4. Ditch nail polish removers that contain acetone.

A nail polish remover loaded with acetone (the solvent responsible for dissolving nail polish lightning-fast) is harsh on weak nails and can dry them out something fierce. “This can cause peeling, splitting, and those unsightly white, mottled marks,” says Dr. Solomon.

Her rec? Tenoverten Non-Acetone Polish Remover. “It’s essential oil-based, removes polish in a matter of seconds, and feels very gentle on nails and cuticles,” she says.

#### 5. Don’t overdo the hand sanitizer.

Because hand sanitizers are typically alcohol-based, constantly applying the stuff can dry out your nails and leave them super brittle. “If you have to use hand sanitizer, try not to get it on your nails, and don’t overdo it,” says Dr. Solomon. Using hand sanitizer wipes can make it easier to avoid the nail area during application—or if you prefer the liquid variety, make sure to slather on moisturizer afterward to balance the scales.

#### 6. Eat more foods that promote strong nails.

Avoid yo-yo dieting, which can lead to vitamin deficiencies that may put the strength of your nails in jeopardy. Make sure you eat enough protein and calcium too, which are thought to promote nail health, says Robin Evans, MD, Connecticut-based board-certified dermatologist and clinical instructor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Loading up on biotin-rich foods, such as veggies, eggs, and nuts, may also help.

#### 7. Stay hydrated.

“Drinking enough water is essential for health, and nail health is no exception,” says Dr. Solomon. “Without adequate moisture, nails can become brittle and break or peel easily.” Staying hydrated will help your nails retain moisture and stay strong. (Here’s a handy hydration calculator to make sure you’re getting enough.)

#### 8. Consider popping biotin supplements.

AMAZON

Nature's Bounty Biotin Supplement

amazon.com

\$8.99

\$5.77 (36% off)

It's yet to be proven without a doubt, but biotin (also known as vitamin b7) may help to strengthen hair and nails. "Because it's water-soluble, it isn't stored by the body, so you have to ensure that you consume it daily," says Dr. Solomon.

Generally, most adults should be getting 30 micrograms (mcg) of biotin daily, according to the National Institutes of Health. The typical recommended supplemental dose is roughly up to 3,000 mcg daily for six months, according to the Cleveland Clinic, but your doctor may recommend less or more, depending on your personal health.

If there's no improvement in nail strength by that time, odds are biotin is unlikely to be helpful. But if your nails do become stronger and you decide to make biotin supplementation a regular thing, make sure you stop taking them a few days before getting any lab tests done, as large amounts of biotin in your system can skew test results.

9. Minimize water exposure.

When your hands are soaked in water for long periods of time (say, while doing the dishes, taking a bath, or going for a swim), this doesn't just dehydrate your skin—it sucks the moisture out of your nails, too.

"Water follows water, so the water in our bodies depletes the longer we soak in it," says Dr. Klein. Things like wearing cotton-lined gloves during chores and keeping your nails outside the water for most of your soak or swim can minimize the blowback—and if that's not possible, thoroughly moisturizing your hands and nails post-dunk is the next best thing.

10. Add a nail strengthener to your routine.

Prescription topical agents, such as Nuvail and Genadur, can help to strengthen weakened nails. While OTC nail hardeners can do the trick in the short-term, prescription strengtheners are the best choice for long-term use, since they contain chemicals that both increase the strength of the nail and trap moisture in to prevent future brittleness. "Consistent and dedicated use of the nail hardeners is key for successful results," says Dr. Allawh.

11. Cut back on gel and acrylic manicures.

They may be touted as an easy alternative for people who have trouble growing their nails, but frequent gel or acrylic manicures can cause your nails to peel, weakening them in the process. These manicures also expose your digits to excessive amounts of acetone in the soak required to remove them, which is very drying to the nail, says Dr. Klein. If you prefer to keep these types of manicures on rotation, make sure to either give your nails time to breathe between applications or save them for special occasions.

## 12. Choose non-toxic nail polishes.

“I recommend avoiding polishes that contain formaldehyde, DBP, and toluene, which are harsher chemicals to already weak nails,” says Dr. Evans. Look for polishes that say “3-free” on the bottle, which means they don’t contain these iffy chemicals. (There are also brands that call themselves “5-free” and “7-free,” where in addition to the big three, their polishes don’t contain formaldehyde resin, camphor, TPHP, and xylene.)

Popular non-toxic nail polish brands include Zoya, Butter London, and Deborah Lippmann. (If you’re not sure whether your go-to nail polish brands are non-toxic, you can always search for them in the EWG’s cosmetics database.)

## 13. Always apply base and top coats.

AMAZON

essie Grow Stronger Base Coat

[essieamazon.com](http://essieamazon.com)

\$8.96

Base and top coats are especially helpful when your nails are on the weaker side because they provide your nails with an additional protective barrier from things like dehydration and breakage, says Dr. Evans. Essie’s Grow Stronger Base Coat leaves nails nourished and protected, for example, while the brand’s Good to Go Top Coat protects your mani from chipping and peeling.

## 14. Take breathers between manicures.

Bottom line: Your nails need to breathe. “Constant use of polish, even non-toxic polish, can weaken the nail,” says Dr. Solomon. If you find that your nails have become especially fragile (and they’re painted more often than not), give them a month off from nail polish to allow them to grow and strengthen.

Applying a keratin treatment between manicures, such as CND RescueRXx, can help nourish your nails during the hiatus.

#### 15. Get a check-up.

While weak nails are usually due to exposure to elements and the aging process, check in with your doctor if it's a new problem and isn't responding to at-home remedies. "There are specific conditions, such as an iron deficiency (anemia), hypothyroidism, psoriasis, and Raynaud's Syndrome (a circulatory condition) that can affect nail strength," says Dr. Klein. The sooner you treat any underlying health issues that might be messing with your nails, the sooner they can grow in healthier and stronger.

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