Psoriasis of the nails

Nail changes occur in up to 50 percent of people with psoriasis and at least 80 percent of people with psoriatic arthritis. The nail problems most commonly experienced by psoriasis patients are:

- **Pitting**: shallow or deep holes in the nail
- **Deformation**: alterations in the normal shape of the nail
- **Thickening** of the nail
- **Onycholysis**: separation of the nail from the nail bed
- **Discoloration**: unusual nail coloration, such as yellow-brown

**Nail treatments**

Because psoriasis affects the nail when the nail is being formed, it is difficult to treat. It can take six months to a year for an affected nail to grow out and be replaced by a new nail. The matrix, where the nail is formed, is difficult to penetrate with topical medications.

The major treatments specifically for nail psoriasis are:

- **Topical treatments**: Calcipotriene, tazarotene, corticosteroids, corticosteroid tape, 5-fluorouracil
- **Intralesional**: injection of corticosteroids into each affected nail
- **Phototherapy**: PUVA (ultraviolet light A with the light-sensitizing drug psoralen)
- **Cosmetic repair**: removing nails deformed by psoriasis with surgery or by using a strong urea compound. Long, thick nails can be scraped and filed down. Nail polish can cover color changes. Pitted nails can be buffed and polished. In some instances, artificial nails can be used.

In general, your doctor will not prescribe systemic therapy for isolated nail psoriasis. However, when people have severe, generalized psoriasis, the nails may improve due to the treatments they are already receiving for other parts of the body. If a person’s condition requires methotrexate, for example, nails might improve. Similar results may be expected from other systemic treatments, including biologics.

Oral retinoids, such as acitretin, can be helpful for skin lesions of psoriasis. However, it usually results in thin nails that are not normal in appearance. The nail changes caused by retinoids resolve several months after stopping retinoids.

Nails can improve with PUVA treatment. As with systemic treatments, the nail improvement may lag behind clearance of plaques on the body by several months.

Onychomycosis, a fungal infection that causes thickening of the nails, may be present with nail psoriasis. It can be treated with systemic antifungal agents. About one-third of people who have nail psoriasis also have a fungal infection. This infection could be triggering the psoriasis or making it worse. It is important to note that treating the fungus may not cause the nail psoriasis to clear. Tazarotene may reduce pitting and the separation of the nail from the nail bed.
Nail care

In most cases, keep the nails trimmed back with manicure scissors to the point of firm attachments. Keep nails as short as possible. Loose nails can be injured when they rub against surfaces. It is important to protect your nails from damage because trauma will often trigger or worsen nail psoriasis.

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One way to do this is to wear gloves while you are working with your hands. Be gentle when using instruments for cleaning under the nails. Vigorous cleaning and scraping may break the skin where the nail is attached.

Soaking your nails can help. Try three capfuls of tar bath oil in a bowl of warm water. Soak your fingers for 20 minutes and then rub moisturizer into each nail. A variety of tar bath oils and moisturizers is available at local pharmacies.

If your nails are mostly intact, using a nail hardener or artificial nails can improve the way they look. However, test for sensitivity to glues and chemicals before using artificial nails. Be aware that a manicurist may be reluctant to apply nails to badly eroded fingernails.

Toenails can be improved by soaking your feet for 10 minutes in a tub of warm water. Afterward, gently file the thickened part of the toenail with an emery board. Then use high-quality clippers to cut off a small piece at a time. The aim is to cut straight across the toenail to help keep it from becoming ingrown. Wearing roomy shoes can help you avoid the friction that causes toenails to thicken.

Practical tips for fragile nails

- Wear protective gloves for washing clothes or dishes.
- Don’t expose hands to household cleaning products, including detergents.
- Wear gloves in cold weather and when gardening.
- Apply moisturizer to hands and nails after washing your hands, bathing and before you go to bed. Plain petroleum jelly is an excellent moisturizer for cuticles and nails.
- Don’t use your nails as a tool.
- Be gentle with manicure tools, especially metal ones. Don’t push back cuticles. Use a fine file or emery board to shape nails. Keep nails short.