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Deficiencies in certain nutrients and difficulty with digestion impact the health of our nails. Brittle nails may result from a lack of vitamin A; dry nails may need more B vitamins. Keep in mind that prescription drugs and some medical treatments—including chemotherapy—can impair nail health.

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The common bane of many a hand, hangnails may be a symptom of eating too many simple sugars or not enough protein, folic acid, or vitamin C. A good multivitamin or supplement for nails and hair can help prevent these detached pieces of cuticle. In the meantime, keep cuticles moisturized with a nightly massage of jojoba or vitamin E oils.

NATURALLY MANICURED

Moisturizing is critical to attractive, healthy-looking hands and nails. Angelica Vrablic, PhD, manager of nutrition research for Home Health, recommends using a high-quality hand lotion and rubbing it not only into the hands but also into the cuticles and unpolished nails.

Even if you exfoliate your body, you may forget your hands. Autumn Blum, formulator and CEO for Organix-South Inc., suggests regular exfoliation to slough off dry, rough skin. This allows for better absorption of botanical oils and creams.

When shopping for hand moisturizers, look for ones that absorb quickly but aren't greasy. After all, you want to be able to open doors and bottles without slippery fingers. Hydrating ingredients include skin-firming hyaluronic acid and natural vitamin E, which benefit skin, nails, and cuticles. "Natural antioxidants such as retinol, goji

berry extract, and green tea extract can help hands look smoother and have a more youthful appearance," says Vrablic.

Harold Lancer, MD, a board-certified dermatologist based in Beverly Hills, suggests using rich barrier creams to help prevent eczema. He recommends shea butter as a topical ingredient because it locks in moisture and acts as a hydrator. "Aloe vera is another key ingredient to look for. It soothes the hands and acts as an anti-inflammatory," he adds.

Since neem is rich in antioxidants and essential fatty acids, a product containing it—or even the straight oil—will help soothe dry and inflamed hands as well as cuticles. Applied directly to the nails, neem oil can help reduce stubborn fungal infections—including those resulting from the use of artificial nails.

To fade those unsightly brown age spots or hyperpigmentation that appear on the back of your hands, look for fading creams that contain neem oil. "Typically, the chemicals and even herbs used for lightening and brightening the skin can cause irritation in many people. Because neem oil is such a strong counter-irritant, most people do not find any skin sensitivity with the use of this effective product," comments Blum.

Keeping nails trim and clean helps ensure beautiful hands. Always file your nails in one direction, maintaining a balanced shape. For instance, if your cuticles are oval shaped, file your nails in the same style; if you have square cuticles, use this shape to define your nails. Any nail longer than one-quarter inch past the fingertip is more likely to break. Unless you have lots of time to manicure your nails, you may prefer this shorter length. ■■■