Nail Changes during Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can cause changes to your fingernails and toenails. This is usually not a serious side effect, but understanding these changes and knowing what to expect can be very helpful. Fingernails are affected more than toenails and usually grow out normally in about 6 months after finishing treatment. Listed below are some of the common nail changes to expect during chemotherapy.

- You may develop blemishes on your nails, such as horizontal or vertical lines, or small indentations. These spots are not permanent and will grow out as the nail grows.
- Your nails may look bruised. People with dark complexions notice the color changes more.
- Your nails may lift off the nail bed or fall off after several rounds of chemotherapy. This can put you at risk for infection if bacteria enter that site.
- Cuticles may become dry and cracked.

Managing Nail Changes

- Keep fingernails and toenails clean and trimmed.
- Wear protective gloves for housekeeping, washing dishes, and gardening to prevent infection and reduce damage to the nails.
- Use a nail hardener such as Hard as Nails® to strengthen the nail itself.
- Apply Tea Tree oil over and under fingernails and toenails to help prevent infection. Available at health food stores.
- Apply Bag Balm® to cuticles to moisturize them. It is available over-the-counter at your local pharmacy or drugstore.
- Don’t bite or tear at your nails as this puts you at risk for infection.
- Massage cuticle cream into the nail to prevent drying, splitting, and hangnails.
- Limit the time your hands are in water as this may lead to fungal infections.
- Avoid artificial nails and professional manicures.
- Wear loose, comfortable shoes.

When to Call?

Be sure and speak with your healthcare team when you begin to experience any fingernail or toenail changes as you are receiving chemotherapy. Between clinic visits, call with any signs or symptoms of infection, such as, increased nail pain or redness (especially around the cuticle), fever, or drainage of any kind from around your nails.