

GOOD LOOKS

I was smitten the first time I had a gel polish mani some five years ago. Painted, and cured under a UV light, my nails were completely dry as I left the nail bar. My red polish, usually such a high maintenance shade, lasted chip-free and shiny for a full three weeks. What's not to love?

Quite a lot, if recent headlines are to be believed. Concerns have been raised about a possible skin cancer risk because of the UV lights often used. It's also been suggested that the process of applying and removing the gel polish causes damage to the nail. With these long-lasting manis being offered on every high street, I had to investigate.

### How dangerous are UV lamps?

Alarm bells were sounded when a dermatology journal in the US reported the case of two women developing skin cancers on their hands. They were gel mani regulars and so exposed to UVA via the drying lamps. However, two subsequent studies, one here and one in the US, have concluded the skin cancer risk from these lamps is very low. Dr Alina Markova, who did the most recent study, said: 'Nail lamps are safe for 250 years of weekly manicures, and even then there would be a low risk of skin cancer. Not no risk, but low risk.'

If low risk is still too high a risk for you, take dermatologist Dr Sam Bunting's advice and wear tightly woven fingerless gloves. 'This will reduce the risk to virtually zero,' she says. Also check if your manicurist is using a UV lamp. Some brands, such as Jessica and OPI, recommend using LED lights, which aren't thought to pose a risk.

### And what about nail damage?

Signs of damage include nail thinning, brittleness and peeling - all of which have been attributed to frequent gel manis by New York dermatologist Dr Chris Adigun in a recent article in the American Academy of Dermatology journal. She also highlighted a study that used ultrasound and other measurements to show thinning of the nail plate after just one treatment. However, she conceded that it's not clear whether it's the chemicals in the gel polishes, or the acetone removal methods, that could be causing the problem.

It's worth pointing out, too, that the



## THE TRUTH ABOUT gel polish

studies quoted involved only a few women, and as manis are far cheaper in the US, frequent manis can mean every other week. To be fair, all the brands I spoke to (Shellac, OPI, Nails Inc, Jessica, Artistic Colour Gloss and Biosculpture) have recommended protocols on how to use their products - which don't include roughing up the nail, long soaks in acetone or scraping the gels off, which they all say are damaging. At most, nails are gently buffed before gel is applied, though with some processes such as Shellac, this isn't done at all. For gel removal, most brands add conditioners to their acetones (which you can also buy for home use) and recommend you 'wrap' the colour off. You can use either specially designed fabric wraps, or cotton wool which you soak in the acetone. After 10 minutes the gel should come away easily.

Of course despite training and guidelines, you're relying on the expertise of the manicurist. I've had a few bad experiences myself. I was once left with my nails and fingers soaking in a couple of bowls of acetone for 15 minutes. I've also had my nails roughly abraded with an emery board 'to help the gel grip'. It took a couple of months to get my nails back into good condition after that one. As celebrity manicurist Jenni Draper said to me: 'If you feel the manicurist is overdoing it with the file, don't be afraid to say something.'

My advice? Applied with good technique and carefully removed, the gel mani won't damage your nails - and it's easy to minimise the low skin cancer risk. Even the cautious Dr Adigun concluded that an occasional one does not pose a serious risk to nail health. □

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