

NANDU NAI LEARNING

Nail Technician

Salon textbook

English

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This textbook is for nail technicians who work with real clients in a real salon. It covers the parts of the job that decide whether a set lasts, whether a client stays, and whether the shop stays open: sanitation, anatomy, shape, timing, product control, structure, and the judgement to stop. There are twelve chapters, each with three sections, a salon example, and a caution. The early chapters explain what is under the nail and what a technician may and may not touch. The middle chapters cover the services themselves, from a forty-five minute manicure to a builder gel overlay. The last chapters deal with the nails that should not be covered, the signs that end a service, and the calendar that keeps a client's nails healthy between visits. The clients in the examples are fictional, but the problems are the ones that walk through the door every week. Read a section before you try it on a paying client, and keep the book at the station for the days when a nail does something you did not expect.

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Sanitation



Hand hygiene and the station

Begin every service with clean hands and a clean station, because the client reads both before the first nail is touched. Wash with soap and water for at least twenty seconds, dry with a paper towel, and use hand rub when the hands are not visibly soiled. Wash again after the gloves come off, even when the gloves looked intact. Set out only the tools this service needs, cover the work surface, and put a lined waste bin within reach. Keep food, phones, and personal bags away from the work area. A tidy station is not decoration; it is the first control against cross-contamination, and it is the part of the service a client can check with their own eyes before they decide to trust you.

Anything that touches skin or nails is cleaned first and disinfected second, because disinfectant does not work through debris. Scrub visible material off metal implements with soap and water, dry them, then submerge them fully in a hospital-grade disinfectant mixed at the label ratio. Leave them for the full contact time printed on the bottle, not a shortened version that fits the appointment. Use a container with a lid and write the date on the mix. Change the solution when the label says to, not when it looks cloudy, because a dirty jar can carry bacteria from one client to the next while still smelling clean. Rinse and dry tools before storage if the label requires it.

Porous items cannot be disinfected with any confidence, so files, buffers, wooden sticks, and foam separators belong to one client only. Label a storage envelope with the client name and keep the file for the next visit, or hand it to them at the end. Drill bits collect dust in the flutes; brush them clean, then disinfect, and never move a bit from a lifted or discoloured nail to a healthy one. Brushes and product pots are a separate problem. A brush that has touched a nail must not go back into a shared pot, because that is how one client's bacteria and one client's dust reach the next person. Pour product out, or keep a pot per client.

The reset between clients is the habit that holds the whole system together. Clear the used towel, bag the cotton, carry the tools to the dirty zone, wipe the table, lay a fresh cover, and put out a fresh file before the next person sits down. Write the disinfectant batch time in the station log so a colleague, an inspector, or a nervous client can see what was done and when. Once a month, open the cupboard and check that the spill kit is stocked, the sharps container is below its fill line, and the disinfectant is in date. None of this earns a compliment. It earns the thing that keeps the chair full: a client who never has to wonder whether the tools were clean.

- 1. Wash your hands for twenty seconds and dry them with a paper towel.
- 2. Use hand rub in front of the client before any tool is picked up.

- 3. Clear the station, wipe the surface, and lay one fresh cover for this client.
- 4. Set out only the tools the booked service needs, and nothing extra.
- 5. Check both hands for a cut, rash, or sore before you begin.
- 6. Keep the dirty tray apart and never let a used file touch the clean tray.
- 7. Clean every implement, then disinfect it for the full label contact time.
- 8. Log the batch time, store the tools dry and covered, and reset the station.

Salon example

Rekha arrives ten minutes early for a gel removal while the technician is still wiping the table after the previous client. The technician does not rush the reset. She bags the used cotton, carries the tools to the dirty zone, scrubs them, and places them in disinfectant for the contact time printed on the label. She sets a small timer on the shelf so she does not guess. Then she wipes the table, lays a fresh cover, opens a new file and buffer, and pours a small amount of gel remover into a clean dish instead of dipping into the shared bottle. Only after that does she invite Rekha to sit. The delay is four minutes. Rekha notices the clean tray, the sealed pouch, and the fresh file, and she books her next appointment before she leaves. The technician writes the batch time in the station log while the first wrap soaks, and she shows the log to a client who asks how the tools are cleaned. That one page answers the question better than any promise. She keeps a spare timer in the drawer so the contact time never depends on memory.

CAUTION

Never start a service with tools that have only been wiped or rinsed.

Sharp tools and the no-cut rule

Cuticle nippers are for a loose flap of dead tissue, not for living skin. A credo blade is not used in this salon at any stage, because it cuts living tissue, removes the seal that keeps moisture and dirt out, and can carry blood from one client to the next. Work with the tip of a nipper only on tissue that is white, dry, and clearly separated, and stop at the first sign of pink. If you cannot tell whether tissue is dead, leave it. A small tag of skin left alone will settle in a few days. A cut will not, and the client will feel it every time they wash their hands for the next week.

The cuticle is a seal, not an obstacle. It covers the new growth at the base of the nail and keeps water, shampoo, cleaning fluid, and bacteria out of the tissue that makes the plate. When it is cut, the body responds with inflammation, and the area becomes red, swollen, and tender. Product applied beside that inflammation will not sit flat, and a week later it will lift at exactly the place where the skin was opened. Pushing the cuticle back with a soft pusher and a little warm water or softener moves the dead tissue without breaching the living layer underneath, which is why this salon pushes and does not cut.

Any tool that has touched blood is contaminated until it has been processed. Wear gloves, put a sharp implement into a rigid sharps container, and never reach into a waste bag with a bare hand. Change gloves after contact with blood or body fluid, and wash your hands even when the gloves looked

intact, because a pinhole leak is invisible. Keep a spill kit at the station and know where it is before you need it. Write down what happened, when, and which tool was involved. A technician who treats blood casually is telling every client in the room that the clean tray is a performance, and clients are right to read it that way.

Clients often ask for the cuticle to be cut because a previous salon did it and the nail looked longer for a week. Refusing needs a reason that sounds like care rather than laziness. Say that the skin at the base is a seal, that cutting it opens the door to infection, and that this salon pushes instead. Offer the alternative in the same breath: a softener, a gentle push, and oil. If the client insists, they are free to choose another salon, but they should not be able to say they were not told. Write the sensitive spot on their card so the next appointment starts with that knowledge instead of discovering it again.

- 1. Look at all ten nails before you pick up a nipper, and note any red or broken skin.
- 2. Check that the implements have been cleaned and disinfected, not just wiped.
- 3. Soften the cuticle with warm water or a softener, then push with a silicone pusher.
- 4. Use nipper tips only on a white, dry tag that has clearly separated from the skin.
- 5. Stop at the first sign of pink, and leave the rest of the tag alone.
- 6. Keep the credo blade, the scalpel, and every other blade out of the service.
- 7. Clean the area, check for blood, and keep all product away from the spot.
- 8. Note the sensitive area on the client card and use a gentler method next time.

Salon example

A client named Farah has a dry, ragged cuticle edge on her right thumb. The technician lifts the loose white tag with the tip of the nipper, sees a healthy pink line underneath, and stops immediately. She does not chase the edge. She cleans the area, checks that no blood is present, and continues the manicure without product near that spot. The next day Farah messages that the thumb feels fine, and the technician notes the sensitive spot on her client card. At the next visit she uses a cuticle softener and a gentle push instead of nippers. The edge has healed flat, and the client says it is the first time a manicure has not left her sore. She also mentions that another salon used to cut the cuticle until it bled and told her it was normal. The technician explains, without criticising the other shop, why this salon pushes instead, and Farah books a monthly standing appointment. The note on the card is short, but it is the reason the next service takes ten minutes less. Farah now books the same technician every month, and the note on the card keeps the service gentle.

CAUTION

If you see pink under the nipper, you have gone too far; stop.

When the skin is nicked

If you nick the skin, stop the service. Remove your gloves, wash your hands, and put on a fresh pair. Clean the area with soap and water or the antiseptic your workplace protocol names, then cover it

with a sterile dressing. Put the tool that caused the nick into the dirty zone, or into the sharps container if it is sharp. Do not apply polish, gel, acrylic, or primer to open skin, and do not seal a dressing under product. If the nick is on the nail area, end that part of the service and explain why. The client may say it is nothing and ask you to continue, but a small opening under a sealed product is exactly the environment bacteria look for.

Record what happened, however small it seems. Write the time, the tool, the site, and what you did, and tell the client what to watch for over the next few days. Offer to rebook the finish once the skin has closed. A technician who hides a nick to save the appointment is trading a small embarrassment for an infection, a complaint, and a reputation problem. Honesty at the moment of the nick is part of the service, not an admission of failure. Small nicks still count as exposures, and the record protects the client, the technician, and the shop if a question comes later. Keep the record factual and brief.

A nick is an exposure event, so the tool and the area need the same care as any other blood contact. Wear gloves while you clean up, put sharps into the rigid container, and disinfect the work surface before the next client. Change the file and the buffer that touched the area, even if nothing visible is on them. Wash your hands after the gloves come off. If the shop has an exposure log, fill it in the same day, while the details are accurate. Do not put the incident on social media and do not discuss the client's name in the staff room. The client trusted you with their hands and their embarrassment; the record is for safety, not for conversation.

Some clients need a lower threshold for referral. A client with diabetes, poor circulation, a bleeding disorder, or a weakened immune system should not have a nick treated as a small salon problem. Stop, clean, cover, and tell them to have it looked at if it does not close quickly or if redness, heat, or swelling appears. The same applies to a client on blood thinners whose nick keeps oozing. You are not diagnosing and you are not treating; you are recognising that this hand needs a clinician. Say it plainly and without alarm, and offer to finish the service when they are ready. A refused finish is cheaper than a wound that will not heal.

- 1. Stop the service at the first sign of blood, and set the tool down.
- 2. Remove your gloves, wash your hands, and put on a fresh pair.
- 3. Clean the area with soap and water or the protocol antiseptic.
- 4. Cover the nick with a sterile dressing, and do not seal it under product.
- 5. Move the tool to the dirty zone, or to the sharps container if it is sharp.
- 6. Change the file and buffer that touched the area before you continue.
- 7. Record the time, tool, site, and action, and tell the client what to watch.
- 8. Rebook the finish after the skin has closed, and refer a high-risk client.

Salon example

During a dry manicure, a technician catches the side wall with a file and opens a tiny line at the corner. She stops at once, sets the file aside, and removes her gloves. She washes her hands, cleans the client's finger, and covers the line with a small sterile dressing. The client says it is nothing and asks her to keep going, but the technician explains that gel on an open line can trap bacteria and cause a reaction. She finishes the other nine nails, leaves that one bare, and does not charge for the unfinished nail. She writes the incident in the shop log, notes the file number, and tells the client to watch for redness or swelling and to see a doctor if either appears. Three days later the skin has closed, and the client returns for a short appointment to match the missing nail. She tells the owner that the honesty is why she came back, and the technician adds the side wall sensitivity to the card so the next file stays away from that corner. The note is dated and signed, and the owner checks the log at the end of the week.

CAUTION

A nick ends the service at that site; do not cover it with product.

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Shapes



The nail bed decides first

A shape is only as good as the nail bed under it. The nail plate sits on the nail bed, which runs from the matrix at the base to the hyponychium at the tip. A narrow bed cannot carry a wide square tip without stress at the corners, and a short bed cannot carry a long stiletto without a lever arm that pulls on the matrix. Look at bed width, bed length, the curve of the free edge, and the skin along the side walls before you pick up a file. The shape should follow the bed, not fight it, and the client should hear that reasoning before the first stroke.

Measure with your eyes and with your hands. Turn the client's hand over and look at the free edge from the palm side, where the curve of the bed is easiest to see. Compare the width of the nail at the base with the width at the tip; a bed that narrows sharply will look pinched in a square, and a bed that stays wide will look heavy in an almond. Ask what the hands do all day, because a shape that survives a desk job may fail in a kitchen. Two minutes of this conversation prevents a repair appointment and explains, in advance, why the photo on the client's phone may not be the right choice.

The oval shape follows the natural curve of the fingertip and narrows gently at the tip. It suits short to medium beds, narrow beds, and clients who use their hands hard, because there are no sharp corners to catch. File from the side toward the tip in small, even strokes, and keep both sides symmetrical. Stop before the free edge becomes a point, since a narrow oval tip splits more easily than a rounded one. Check the shape from the client's side of the hand, not only from above, because a shape that looks right to you may look crooked to the person wearing it. Symmetry is judged at arm's length, not under a lamp.

Sometimes the right answer is a compromise, and saying so is part of the craft. A client with a short, wide bed who wants length can have a soft oval with a slightly stronger side wall, built over an enhancement rather than on the natural edge. A client with a curved plate can have the product matched to the curve instead of a flat tip forced onto it. What you should not do is file the natural nail thin to make a shape fit, because the plate bends, the product lifts, and the shape lasts a week. Offer the version the bed can carry, show it on one nail, and let the client decide with the evidence in front of them.

- 1. Look at the bed width, bed length, and free-edge curve before choosing a shape.
- 2. View the hand from the palm side to see the true curve of the bed.
- 3. Ask what the hands do all day, and how long the client wants the set to last.
- 4. Show two sample shapes on one hand rather than describing them.

- 5. File the natural edge in small strokes from the side toward the tip.
- 6. Check both side walls from the client's viewpoint, at arm's length.
- 7. Keep the length just past the fingertip on a first set or a working hand.
- 8. Never thin the plate to force a shape the bed cannot support.

Salon example

A client named Meera has short, wide nail beds and asks for long square tips because she saw them on a video. The technician files a sample oval on one nail and a square on another, then holds both hands up so Meera can compare. The square corners sit beyond the bed, and the free edge already looks ready to catch on a sleeve. Meera chooses the oval. The technician keeps the length just past the fingertip, follows the bed curve, and explains that the shape can grow into an almond later when the free edge has more support. She also explains why she will not file the plate thin to make the nail look longer: a thin plate bends under the product, and a bend becomes a lift. Meera books a shorter maintenance visit and says the oval still looks long because the sides are clean. She writes the chosen shape and length on the card, and at the next appointment the technician starts from that note instead of from the video. The card note saves the same conversation at every visit, and the shape stays consistent.

CAUTION

Do not force a shape the nail bed cannot support.

Squoval and almond

The squoval shape is a straight free edge with rounded corners. It keeps more strength than a pure square because the corners no longer catch, and it suits wide beds, short beds, and clients whose hands are in water or on a keyboard all day. File the edge straight across, then soften each corner with two or three light strokes. Keep the sides parallel rather than pinching them in, because a pinched side wall weakens the stress area. Check the corners with your fingertip; if you can feel a hard point, it will catch on clothing before the week is out. A squoval that is slightly narrower at the tip looks tidier than one that flares.

The almond shape tapers to a soft point and needs length to look right. It flatters long beds and narrow hands, and it gives a slim line without the fragility of a stiletto. Because the tip is narrower than the base, the free edge has less material at the point, so the apex must be built to support it. File the sides in toward the center, keep the curve continuous, and avoid a sharp final point. On a client with a short bed, an almond can look stretched and weak; shorten the ambition before you shorten the nail. On a client with a wide bed, a hard taper makes the nail look pinched, so keep the taper gentle.

The two shapes share a rule: the free edge should never be thinner than the structure behind it. A squoval with a paper-thin corner chips at the corner, and an almond with a thin point splits at the point. When you file, work on the free edge and the side wall, not on the surface of the plate. Keep the file at a slight angle so the edge has a little thickness, and finish with a buffer only on the edge, not

across the whole nail. If the client wants the nail to look narrower, take a little from the sides and leave the surface alone; thinness is not elegance, it is a future break.

Ask the client to look at both hands before you move to product. Hands are not identical, and a shape that matches on one side may look off on the other because of the way the fingers curve. Hold the hands together, palm down, at arm's length, and check the tips against each other. If one nail is longer or the curve is flatter, adjust the file rather than the story. Small differences are normal and should be preserved; the goal is a pair of hands that look deliberate, not a set of ten identical plastic tips. A client who sees you check your own work trusts the result more than one who only hears that it looks good.

- 1. Decide the length first, then file the shape into that length.
- 2. For squoval, file the free edge straight across with the file flat.
- 3. Soften both corners with two or three light strokes, and feel them with a fingertip.
- 4. Keep the side walls parallel instead of pinching them inward.
- 5. For almond, taper the sides toward the center in even passes.
- 6. Keep the curve continuous and stop before the tip becomes a sharp point.
- 7. Leave a little thickness at the free edge, and never thin the plate surface.
- 8. Compare both hands at arm's length before you start the product.

Salon example

A receptionist named Anita types for eight hours a day and wants a shape that will not click on the keyboard. The technician suggests squoval in a medium length. She files the edge straight, rounds the corners, and checks that the sides are not pinched. Anita asks for almond instead because it looks more elegant. The technician explains that almond on her short free edge would leave a thin point that would chip within days, and offers a soft squoval with slightly tapered sides as a middle option. Anita agrees. The technician files the taper gently, keeps the corners rounded but not sharp, and checks the edge thickness with her thumb. Two weeks later the set is intact except for one small corner wear, which she smooths with a file in two minutes. Anita books the same shape again, and the technician notes the shape, length, and the slightly tapered side on the card so the next appointment starts consistently. Anita also buys a fine file for the office drawer, and the corner wear becomes a two minute fix instead of a repair booking.

CAUTION

A pointed almond on a short free edge is a chip waiting to happen.

Coffin and stiletto

Coffin, also called ballerina, has tapered sides and a flat tip. It needs length, a strong apex, and clean corners, because the two outer points take the first impact when the hand hits a surface. File the sides in evenly, keep the flat tip level, and do not thin the corners to make them look sharper. On a natural nail, coffin is usually built with an enhancement rather than formed on the free edge alone, because

the natural edge cannot hold a flat tip at that width without support. If the client works with her hands, a shorter coffin is safer than a dramatic one, and a soft square may serve her better.

Stiletto tapers to a narrow point and is the least forgiving shape in the salon. It concentrates stress at the tip, it catches on hair, fabric, and drawers, and it is a poor choice for a nurse, a cook, a mother of small children, or anyone who types hard. When a client asks for stiletto, ask about her work and her daily tasks before you agree. If the nail bed is short or the natural free edge is weak, say no and offer almond. A shape that fails in three days is not a style; it is a repair appointment and a lost client. The client remembers the break, not the photograph that inspired it.

Both shapes live or die on the apex. The apex is the highest point of the enhancement, built over the stress area, roughly the middle of the nail and slightly toward the free edge. On a coffin, the apex keeps the flat tip from levering at the corners. On a stiletto, it keeps the narrow point from snapping at the stress line. Thickness alone is not structure: a thick, flat nail still breaks, and a well-shaped nail can be surprisingly strong at a modest thickness. Build the apex in the right place, keep the cuticle area thin, and taper the sides so the stress travels into the structure instead of into the corner.

Event nails are a separate conversation. A client may want a long stiletto for a wedding on Saturday and return to a desk on Monday. Agree the length, explain what will break first, and book the removal or the reshape before the event, not after the break. If the client travels or works with her hands, offer a shorter version with the same finish. The salon should never promise that a shape will survive work it was not built for. A clear expectation at the desk is better than an emergency message on Sunday night, and it protects both the client's plans and the technician's weekend.

- 1. Ask about work, sport, and daily tasks before agreeing to a long or pointed shape.
- 2. Set the length the free edge can carry, then build the shape within it.
- 3. For coffin, taper both sides evenly and keep the flat tip level.
- 4. Build the apex over the stress area, not at the tip and not at the cuticle.
- 5. Keep the product thin at the cuticle and at the side walls.
- 6. Do not thin the corners or the point to make the shape look sharper.
- 7. Confirm the client can do the shape's daily tasks, and offer a shorter version.
- 8. Book the reshape or removal before the event so nothing is decided in a panic.

Salon example

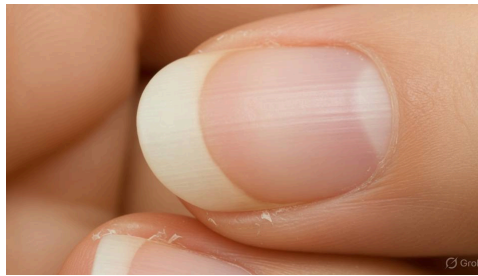
A client named Pooja asks for long stiletto nails in chrome for a wedding. The technician asks what she does for work. Pooja is a nursery teacher who changes nappies, opens boxes, and lifts children all day. The technician shows her a short almond and a medium coffin on two sample tips, and explains that the stiletto point will catch on nappies and clothing and may lift at the side wall within a week. Pooja chooses the coffin at a shorter length. The technician builds a clear apex over the stress area, keeps the corners slightly rounded, and checks the flat tip with a straight edge so it does not slope. She books a two week check and writes the length on the card. The set survives the wedding and the following week of work, and Pooja returns for a fill instead of a repair. At the fill, the technician shortens the coffin slightly and explains that the shape can be rebuilt longer for the next event, when the client has a few quiet days. Pooja sends a photo from the wedding, and the corners are still level in every frame.

CAUTION

A stiletto on a working hand is a repair booking, not a style choice.

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Nail anatomy



The plate, the bed, and the matrix

The nail plate is the hard, visible part of the nail, built mostly from keratin, the same protein that makes hair and the outer layer of skin. It has a thin dorsal layer, a thicker middle layer, and a thin ventral layer that rests on the bed. The plate is flexible rather than rigid, which is why it can absorb a knock without shattering, and why it bends when it is filed too thin. It has no nerve endings of its own, so a client may not feel damage that is being done to it. That silence is dangerous: a plate can be over-filed without complaint, and the consequence appears a week later as a bend, a split, or a lift.

The nail bed is the skin underneath the plate, running from the matrix at the base to the hyponychium at the tip. It is richly supplied with blood vessels, which give a healthy nail its pink colour, and it is attached to the ventral layer of the plate by fine ridges that lock the two together. Because the attachment is so close, anything that separates the plate from the bed creates a pocket, and a pocket holds air, water, and debris. That is why a lift is never just a cosmetic gap. The bed cannot make a new plate on its own; it supports the plate that the matrix pushes forward, and it needs that plate to stay attached to remain healthy.

The matrix is the tissue at the base of the nail that produces new plate cells. It sits partly under the proximal fold and partly under the lunula, and it is the part of the nail that a technician must never cut, press hard, or treat with harsh product. Cells made in the matrix harden, flatten, and are pushed forward, so damage at the base appears as a ridge, a groove, or a white spot that travels slowly toward the tip. Fingernails grow roughly three millimetres a month, and a full replacement takes four to six months. Toenails grow far more slowly, often taking a year or more, which is why a toenail problem is measured in seasons rather than weeks.

This anatomy sets the limits of the job. You can shape the free edge, push the cuticle, clean under the edge gently, and apply product to the plate. You cannot make a nail grow faster by filing it, and you cannot make it thicker by buffing it; buffing removes material, and a shiny surface is not a stronger one. You cannot repair damage inside the matrix from the outside, and you cannot promise that a nail will grow back normally after an injury. When a client asks for stronger nails, the honest answer is about care, product choice, and time, not about a tool that will change the biology. Knowing what the tissue does is what keeps your hands inside the cosmetic line.

- 1. Look at the plate and note its thickness, colour, and any bend or split.
- 2. Check the bed colour along the length, and compare it with the other nails.
- 3. Look at the base for swelling, redness, or a change in the lunula.

- 4. Ask whether the nail has been injured, and when the change appeared.
- 5. Keep every tool off the matrix area; push the cuticle, never press into the base.
- 6. File only the free edge, and never thin the surface of the plate.
- 7. Explain growth honestly: about three millimetres a month on a finger.
- 8. Record what you saw, so the next appointment has a baseline to compare.

Salon example

A client named Sana comes in with a deep horizontal groove across both thumbnails, about halfway up the plate. She is convinced that a previous salon damaged her with a drill and wants the technician to file the groove out. The technician looks at the groove, asks when it first appeared, and learns that Sana was seriously ill about three months ago and lost weight quickly. She explains, in plain words, that a groove that crosses the whole nail is usually a mark left by something that happened at the base months earlier, and that it will travel out on its own as the nail grows. Filing it out would mean thinning the plate, which would bend and split. Instead she shapes the free edge, buffs only very lightly with a fine buffer, applies a ridge-filling base coat, and books a review in six weeks. Sana is disappointed that the line will not disappear today, but she understands why. At the review the groove has moved closer to the tip, and the nail underneath it is smooth, which is the evidence the technician needed to show that the plate was recovering.

CAUTION

You cannot file away damage that was made at the matrix; you can only thin the plate above it.

Lunula, cuticle, and side wall

The lunula is the pale half-moon at the base of the nail, the visible part of the matrix where new cells have not yet flattened and hardened. It is not a separate structure to be cleaned or scraped, and it does not need to be exposed. Some clients have a large lunula, some have none at all, and both are normal. Pressing hard on the lunula, massaging the base with force, or pushing product into that area can bruise or irritate the matrix, and the result may be a ridge that takes months to grow out. Treat the base of the nail as the most delicate part of the service, because it is the part that produces everything else.

The cuticle is the thin layer of dead skin that sits on the plate at the base, and behind it lies the living eponychium, which seals the gap between the skin and the nail. In the salon we push the dead cuticle back with a soft pusher and a little warm water or softener. We do not cut the living tissue behind it, and we do not use a credo blade. When that seal is broken, water, shampoo, and cleaning products get into the space around the matrix, and the skin responds with redness and swelling. A cut cuticle may look tidy for a few days, but the seal has to rebuild, and during that time the nail is less protected than before the service began.

The side walls are the folds of skin on each side of the nail, and they form another seal along the lateral edges. They should never be dug into with a file, an orange stick, or a nipper, because the space

between the plate and the fold is narrow and easy to injure. A hangnail is a small tag of dead skin along the side wall; it can be trimmed with a nipper only if it is white and clearly separated, and only at the very tip. Pulling it, biting it, or tearing it opens a line that can become inflamed. If the side wall is red, swollen, or tender, stop working in that area, keep product away, and refer if it does not settle.

Under the free edge is the hyponychium, a thin seal of skin that keeps dirt and moisture from getting under the plate. It is not a shelf to be scraped. A soft brush and a little soap are enough to clean the area, and a gentle pass with the corner of a towel is enough to dry it. Metal tools, pointed sticks, and drill bits pushed under the free edge break the seal and create a pocket that stays damp. Clients often ask for deep cleaning under the nail because it looks dirty, but the dirt is usually on the underside of the plate, not in the tissue. Clean what you can see, leave the seal alone, and explain why the shallow clean is the better service.

- 1. Identify the lunula and treat the base as a no-pressure zone.
- 2. Soften the cuticle with warm water or softener before pushing.
- 3. Push the dead cuticle back with a silicone or rubber pusher, at a shallow angle.
- 4. Keep the credo blade and every blade away from the cuticle and side walls.
- 5. Trim a hangnail only if it is white, dead, and clearly separated, at the tip.
- 6. Clean under the free edge with a soft brush, not a metal tool.
- 7. Dry the side walls and the underside without digging into the seal.
- 8. Stop and refer if the side wall is red, swollen, or painful.

Salon example

A client named Nisha asks the technician to cut her cuticles because they look thick and she thinks the nails will look longer. The technician explains what the cuticle does, shows her the seal with a hand mirror, and offers a softener and a gentle push instead. Nisha agrees but asks for a deep clean under the free edge, because she works in a kitchen and food gets under the nails. The technician uses a soft brush and soap, cleans what is visible, and explains that the thin skin under the edge is a seal and that digging with a metal tool would create a pocket where moisture and bacteria collect. She finishes with oil and shows Nisha how to use a nail brush at home, with the brush moving away from the seal rather than into it. Nisha books again, and at the next visit her side walls look calmer than they did at the first appointment, which the technician points out as the result of leaving the seal alone. Nisha also stops using a metal tool at home, and the side walls stay calm between visits.

CAUTION

The base of the nail and the side walls are seals; pushing is allowed, cutting is not.

What you may touch and what you may not cut

A simple map keeps the service safe. The pusher goes on the dead cuticle at the base, at a shallow angle, moving the tissue back rather than down. The file goes on the free edge and the side wall,

never across the surface of the plate. The soft brush goes under the free edge, with light pressure and no digging. The nipper goes only on a white, dead tag that has already separated, and only at its tip. The drill goes on product, not on the natural plate, and never on the skin. If you cannot say which structure a tool is touching, you are not ready to use it on a paying client.

Consent belongs inside this map. Tell the client what you are about to do before you do it, especially before nippers, because the sound and the pressure can be alarming. Show them the tag you intend to trim, and let them see that it is dead and separated. If they say no, leave it and continue with the push and the oil. A client who feels informed is more likely to tell you about tenderness, and that information is worth more than a tidy cuticle line. Do not perform a small procedure in silence and then explain it afterward; that is how trust is lost in a single appointment.

Four signs mean stop, whatever the clock says: pink tissue under a tool, pain when you touch an area, blood, and swelling or heat that was not there at the start. A fifth is a change in colour at the base or along the side wall, especially a new dark area that was not on the other hand. None of these signs is a challenge to your skill; they are information. Stop at the site, clean it, keep product away, and decide whether the service can continue elsewhere. A technician who stops early is not slower than one who pushes on. She is the one who does not spend the next week answering messages about a sore finger.

Documentation closes the loop. Write what you saw, what you did, and what you advised, in plain language, without naming a disease. Note the sensitive spots so the next service starts gently, and note any referral so a colleague does not cover the same nail next week. Keep the notes factual and short: date, nail, observation, action. Do not photograph a client's hand without asking, and do not share the image. The record is not paperwork for its own sake; it is how a small observation becomes a pattern, and how a pattern becomes a decision to refer rather than to cover.

- 1. Name the structure before you touch it: plate, cuticle, side wall, or free edge.
- 2. Use the pusher at a shallow angle on dead tissue only.
- 3. Keep the file on the free edge, never on the plate surface.
- 4. Ask before using nippers, and show the client the tag you plan to trim.
- 5. Stop at pink tissue, pain, blood, or new swelling.
- 6. Keep all product away from an area that has been opened or irritated.
- 7. Write the observation, the action, and any advice on the client card.
- 8. Refer rather than cover when the change is new, spreading, or painful.

Salon example

A new client named Aarti sits down with a small red area along the side of her index finger. She says it has been there for two days and asks the technician to cover it with gel because she has a presentation on Friday. The technician looks at the area, sees redness and a little swelling, and explains that she will not put product over it. She offers to do the other nine nails, keep that finger bare, and show Aarti how to keep the area clean and dry. Aarti is annoyed at first and says another salon would just do it. The technician does not argue; she explains that gel over a hot, swollen area would trap moisture and make the redness worse, and that she would rather lose one nail than cause a problem before a presentation. She finishes the nine nails, writes the observation on the card, and advises Aarti to have the finger looked at if the redness spreads or if it becomes more painful. Aarti returns ten days later with the area settled and asks for the missing nail. She also asks the technician to explain the rule to her sister, who has been covering a similar spot for months.

CAUTION

If you cannot name the structure under the tool, put the tool down.

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Disorder versus disease



Ridges, bitten nails, and a bruise you can see

Not every nail that looks unusual is a medical problem. Longitudinal ridges, which run from the base to the tip like fine corduroy, are common with age and with dry nails, and they are usually harmless. They can be softened with a ridge-filling base coat and a very light buff with a fine grit, but the buff must not thin the plate. A transverse ridge that crosses the whole nail is different: it often marks an illness, a high fever, or a period of poor nutrition that interrupted growth months earlier, and it will travel out on its own. If a client has a new ridge pattern on several nails and no explanation, refer, because the salon should not guess at the cause.

Bitten nails are a cosmetic problem when the skin is intact. The plate is often short, the side walls are ragged, and the free edge may be irregular, but there is no open wound. In that case, gentle work is appropriate: a short oval or squoval, a light buff on the surface only if the plate can take it, and a strengthening base coat rather than a long extension. The first visit should not add length, because a long tip on a bitten nail gives the client something to pick at and puts stress on a plate that is already short. If the skin is broken, bleeding, or weeping, there is no cosmetic service at that site; clean it, cover it, and refer. The habit itself is not yours to treat, and a bad-tasting polish is not a medical plan.

A bruise under the nail, called a subungual hematoma, is visible as a dark red, purple, or black patch under the plate. It usually follows a knock, a door, or a heavy object, and if the nail is not lifting and the finger is not throbbing, it can be left alone while it grows out. Cosmetic work is possible if the skin is intact and the plate is stable, but keep the product thin over the area, avoid pressure, and do not drill or pierce the plate to release blood. That is a medical procedure, not a salon one. If the bruise is new, painful, spreading, or accompanied by swelling, refer, because a collection of blood under pressure needs a clinician. If there was no injury at all and a dark patch appears, refer the same day.

The distinction is not about how strange the nail looks. It is about whether the tissue is intact, whether the change is stable, and whether there is pain, heat, swelling, or separation. A stable ridge on a healthy hand is a cosmetic surface. A new dark streak that has appeared over a few weeks is not. A bruised nail that is settling is a cosmetic surface. A bruised nail that is throbbing and lifting is not. Learn to ask three questions: when did it appear, is it changing, and does it hurt. The answers decide whether you pick up a file or pick up the phone and refer.

- 1. Ask when the change appeared and whether it has changed since.
- 2. Ask whether the nail or the skin around it hurts, throbs, or feels hot.
- 3. Check that the skin is intact before planning any cosmetic work.

- 4. For stable ridges, use a ridge filler and a light buff, never a thinning buff.
- 5. For bitten nails with intact skin, keep the first set short and simple.
- 6. For a stable bruise, work thinly over the area and apply no pressure.
- 7. Do not pierce, drill, or drain a bruised nail under any circumstances.
- 8. Refer a new dark patch, a spreading bruise, or any nail that is painful.

Salon example

A client named Kavita comes in with a dark purple mark under her thumbnail. She shut the thumb in a car door eight days ago and the nail is still attached. The skin is intact, the finger is not swollen, and she says the throbbing stopped after the first two days. The technician checks the other nails, asks whether the mark has spread, and decides that a short, thin gel polish is reasonable as long as she keeps the product thin over the bruise and does not press on it during the massage. She explains that the mark will grow out over several months and that the new nail behind it will look normal. She also explains what would change the plan: if the pain returned, if the nail started to lift, or if the bruise spread, Kavita should see a doctor rather than book a fill. Kavita books a removal in three weeks so the nail can be checked as it grows. At that appointment the mark has moved a little toward the tip, the plate is flat, and the technician takes a note for the file.

CAUTION

A dark mark that appeared without an injury is a referral, not a design opportunity.

Fungus look, paronychia, and green under a lift

Some nails look thick, yellow-brown, crumbly, and separated from the bed, with debris packed under the free edge. The salon does not decide what that is. It may be a fungal infection, it may be the result of trauma, psoriasis, or a reaction to a product, and only a clinician can tell the difference. What matters at the desk is that a crumbly, lifting nail is not a surface for an enhancement. Product needs a stable plate to bond to, and a plate that is separating and crumbling cannot provide it. Polish or gel over that nail will trap moisture, hide the change, and delay the treatment the client actually needs. Refer, and say why in one sentence.

Paronychia is the name for inflammation around the nail fold, and it can be red, swollen, tender, and sometimes filled with pus. The skin may be warm, and the client may say it throbs. This is not a cuticle that needs pushing, and it is not a nail that needs product. Do not squeeze it, do not try to drain it, do not apply a heated tool, and do not cover it with gel or acrylic. Refer the client to a doctor, especially if the redness is spreading up the finger or if they have diabetes or a weakened immune system. A salon that squeezes a swollen fold is practising medicine badly; a salon that refers is doing its job well.

A green or blue-green stain under a lifted enhancement is a familiar sight, and it has a clear explanation. The lift creates a small, warm, damp pocket between the product and the plate, and bacteria that thrive in moisture settle there. The stain is a by-product of that bacterial activity, not dirt, and it is not something to scrub away and cover. The product has to come off, the plate has to be

cleaned and dried, and the area has to be kept open until it looks normal. If the stain is spreading, if the nail is painful, or if the skin around it is red and swollen, refer. Do not seal it, and do not fill over it, even if the client has an event and asks for a quick fix.

The conversation is easier when you describe what you see instead of naming a condition. Say that the product has lifted, that moisture has collected underneath, and that the colour is coming from bacteria in that damp space. Say that covering it would keep the moisture in and make it worse. Then offer the rest of the service and a removal on the affected nail. Most clients accept this when the explanation is physical and specific. The ones who argue are usually afraid of the cost or the look, not of the science, so give them a plan: removal today, a review in a week, and a new set when the plate is sound. That plan is the service.

- 1. Look at every nail before you agree to a service, including the ones under old product.
- 2. Note thickness, colour, crumbling, separation, and debris under the edge.
- 3. Check the skin folds for redness, swelling, heat, or pus.
- 4. Do not squeeze, drain, treat, or cover an inflamed nail fold.
- 5. Remove lifted product rather than filling over it, and do not seal a green stain.
- 6. Refer a thick, crumbly, yellow nail instead of polishing it.
- 7. Explain the damp pocket under a lift in plain words, without naming a disease.
- 8. Offer the rest of the service and a review date so the client has a plan.

Salon example

A client named Ritu arrives with a set of acrylics that she has kept for seven weeks because she has been busy. Two nails have lifted at the cuticle, and under one of them the plate shows a green-black patch. The technician removes the other nails first, then works on the green one with a gentle soak and a plastic pusher, never prying. She cleans the plate, dries it, and looks at it under the lamp. The stain covers a small area near the side wall, and the plate underneath is firm. She explains that moisture was trapped under the lift, that the colour is from bacteria in that damp pocket, and that she will not put new product on it today. She refers Ritu to a doctor if the area becomes painful or spreads, and gives her a review appointment in ten days. She also explains that the lift started because the set was left too long, and books the next fill at three weeks. Ritu is unhappy about leaving with one bare nail, but she keeps the review, and at the review the stain has faded and the plate is sound.

CAUTION

A green stain means the product comes off and the nail stays open; it never gets covered.

You do not diagnose

The salon does cosmetic work. It does not diagnose a fungal, bacterial, or viral condition, and it does not prescribe a cream, a tablet, or a home remedy. This is not a limitation to apologise for; it is the boundary that keeps clients safe and the business out of trouble. A diagnosis made in a salon can be

wrong, and a wrong diagnosis can delay real treatment. A client who is told that a nail is just dry may wait six months before seeing a doctor, and by then a treatable problem has become a harder one. Say what you see, say what you will and will not do, and send the client to someone who can examine, test, and prescribe.

The language matters as much as the decision. Use descriptions instead of labels: thick and crumbly, separated at the tip, red and swollen at the fold, dark line from the base. Avoid the words fungus, infection, and melanoma unless you are quoting what a doctor has already told the client. Avoid saying that something is nothing, because you cannot know that. A useful sentence is short: I can see a change here that I should not cover, and I would like you to have a doctor look at it before I work on this nail. Then stop talking and let the client respond. The silence after a clear sentence is more persuasive than a long explanation.

Record the observation and the advice, and keep the wording neutral. Write the date, the nail, what you saw, and what you recommended, without a diagnosis. If the client declines the referral and asks for a cover, write that down too, and still refuse the cover. A note that says the client was advised to see a doctor protects the shop if the client later says nobody told them. Do not photograph the hand without permission, and store any image the way the shop stores other client records. The note is not evidence against the client; it is a record of care, and it should read like one.

Some findings need speed rather than a routine referral. Spreading redness, a fever, pus, a wound on a diabetic foot, a nail that has lifted after an injury, and a new dark streak that is widening are all reasons to send the client the same day, not next month. Say clearly that this is not a wait-and-see situation, and give the reason in one sentence. Do not drive them to a particular clinic or sell a product on the way out. The role ends at a clear, calm referral, and the client should leave knowing exactly what to do next and why the salon stopped.

- 1. Describe what you see instead of naming a condition.
- 2. Ask when it started, whether it is changing, and whether it is painful.
- 3. Decide whether the skin is intact and the plate is stable.
- 4. Refuse product on any nail you cannot safely cover, and say why briefly.
- 5. Recommend a doctor or a podiatrist, without naming a treatment.
- 6. Do not sell a cream, a supplement, or a home remedy as a cure.
- 7. Record the observation, the advice, and the client's response.
- 8. Send spreading redness, pus, fever, or a new dark streak the same day.

Salon example

A client named Dev has a dark streak running from the cuticle to the tip of his little finger. He has had it for about two months and says it is getting wider. He wants a clear gel coat so it looks neater at work. The technician looks at the streak, compares it with the other hand, and sees that the colour starts under the cuticle and fades toward the tip. She does not call it a name. She says that a new dark line that is widening is something a doctor should look at, and that she will not cover it because a cover would hide any change. Dev says his mother has a similar line and that it is nothing. The technician repeats that she cannot know that, and that the safe step is a check. She offers to do the other nine nails and leaves the little finger bare. She writes the observation and the advice on the card, and gives him a note with the words he can use at the clinic. Three weeks later he messages to say the doctor wants to monitor it and thanked him for coming in early.

CAUTION

Do not name a disease you are not qualified to diagnose, and do not cover what you cannot explain.

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Manicure and pedicure



Manicure order and the clock

A basic manicure belongs in forty-five to sixty minutes, and a gel manicure needs sixty to seventy-five. The clock is not a punishment; it is a plan. Consultation and setup take about five minutes. Removing old product takes ten to fifteen. Shaping and cuticle work take another ten to fifteen. Hand massage takes five to eight, and polish or gel takes ten to twenty depending on the finish. If the booking is forty-five minutes and the client wants gel, the service will either run late or lose a step, and the step that gets lost is usually the one that protects the nail. Quote the realistic time at the desk so the appointment starts with the right expectation.

The order exists because each step prepares the next. Consult first, because a health question can change the whole plan. Remove old product before shaping, because filing over a lifted edge pushes product into the gap. Shape before cuticle work, because dust from the file should not land on skin that has just been pushed. Push the cuticle before product, because product will not bond to skin or to oil. Clean and dehydrate before the base coat, because dust and oil are the two quiet causes of early lifting. Massage comes before polish or gel, not after, because oil on the plate prevents adhesion. Each step has a reason, and when the order changes, something fails later.

Water is the variable most technicians underestimate. A soak softens the plate, and a softened plate expands; when it dries, it shrinks, and product applied in between can lift at the edges. For a plain polish manicure, a short soak is pleasant and harmless. For gel or an enhancement, dry prep is more reliable: clean the plate, push the cuticle with softener, and keep the nail dry before the base coat. If the client has had a soak, wait until the plate looks dry again, or use a dehydrator as the product instructions allow. Do not rush from the bowl to the lamp because the booking is tight. That shortcut is one of the most common reasons a set peels within a week.

Rushing shows in specific places. Cuticle work gets skipped, so the product sits on a ragged edge and lifts. Oil and massage are cut, so the hands look dry and the service feels transactional. Dust is left on the plate, so the polish chips early. The technician starts watching the clock instead of the nail, and a side wall gets filed too thin. Clients do not measure a manicure in minutes, but they do notice a sore finger and a chip on day three. Protect the steps that affect the result, and if time runs short, shorten the art or the massage, never the prep or the cure.

- 1. Book forty-five to sixty minutes for a basic manicure and sixty to seventy-five with gel.
- 2. Consult and check the skin before any tool is laid out.
- 3. Remove old product completely, with a soak rather than a pry.

- 4. File and shape the natural nail before cuticle work.
- 5. Soften, then push the cuticle at a shallow angle, with no cutting.
- 6. Clean and dehydrate the plate, and keep oil off it until the finish is done.
- 7. Massage before the finish, then wipe the plate clean before the base coat.
- 8. Leave five minutes at the end to check shape, cuticle line, and free edge.

Salon example

A client named Priya books a gel manicure at four in the afternoon and mentions that she has to collect her daughter at five. The technician checks the clock, sees that the slot is sixty minutes, and plans the service out loud: removal of the old gel, shape, cuticle, base, two colour coats, top coat, and a short massage. She starts with the removal and does not add a soak that is not needed. She files and shapes while the wraps do their work on the other hand, keeping the dust away from the skin. The cuticle work is quick but not rushed, because she knows that a flooded cuticle line will lift within days. She applies thin coats and cures each one for the full time, which feels slow but keeps the finish flat. The massage is five minutes instead of eight. She finishes at ten minutes to five, checks all ten nails from the client's side, and writes the removal date on the card. Priya leaves on time and comes back three weeks later with a set that has grown but not lifted.

CAUTION

Do not borrow time from cuticle work or curing to catch up.

Pedicure without blades

A pedicure starts with a conversation and a careful look, not with a soak. Ask about diabetes, numb feet, poor circulation, and nerve damage, and ask whether any toe has been painful or changed colour. Look between the toes and along the sole for a cut, a blister, a rash, or a wound. If the skin is not intact, do not soak; clean and work dry, or refer. A soak feels generous, but warm water on broken skin is an invitation, and water between the toes is the beginning of a problem that can take weeks to settle. The assessment takes two minutes and decides the rest of the service.

File the nails straight across, or with a very soft curve, and do not cut down the sides. Cutting down the side of a toenail encourages the edge to grow into the skin, and an ingrown nail is painful and often needs a clinician. Use a file rather than a nipper for the length, and keep the corners slightly rounded so they do not catch on socks. If a corner is already growing into the skin, do not dig for it. Soak briefly if the skin is intact, clean gently, and refer. The client may ask you to cut the corner out because a previous salon did it, but the salon that does that is treating a medical problem with a cosmetic tool.

Hard skin on the heel and the ball of the foot is reduced with a file, in layers, over visits. A blade is never used, even on skin that looks dead, because the depth is impossible to judge and a small slip on a foot can become a wound that will not heal. Work on dry skin or lightly damp skin, use a coarse file with light pressure, and stop before the skin is pink and raw. A pedicure is not a race to remove

everything in one session. If the skin is thick, reduce some of it, oil it, and book the next visit. Clients are often surprised that a gradual approach leaves them more comfortable than an aggressive one.

Dry the feet carefully, especially between the toes, before any product goes on. Massage with a light lotion only if the skin is intact, and keep the pressure comfortable. Apply polish in thin coats, cap the free edge as you would on a hand, and let each coat touch-dry. Check the nails from the client's side and look for polish on the skin, which should be removed with a brush rather than a blade. Give aftercare in plain words: dry between the toes, change socks, wear shoes that do not press, and book a removal rather than peeling the polish. A pedicure that ends with dry feet and clear advice lasts longer than one that ends with a dramatic rasp.

- 1. Ask about diabetes, numbness, circulation, and any painful toe before you start.
- 2. Check between the toes and along the sole for cuts, blisters, rash, or wounds.
- 3. Do not soak if the skin is not intact; work dry or refer.
- 4. File the nails straight across with a soft corner, never down the sides.
- 5. Soak briefly only when the skin is intact, and dry thoroughly afterward.
- 6. Reduce hard skin with a file in layers, and stop before the skin is pink.
- 7. Never use a blade on a foot, even where the skin looks dead.
- 8. Dry between the toes, polish thinly, and give aftercare before the client leaves.

Salon example

A client named Sunita comes for a pedicure before a family wedding. She has thick skin on both heels, and the nail on her big toe is pressing into the skin at the corner. The technician asks about diabetes and numbness, checks the skin between the toes, and sees that the corner is red but not open. She explains that she will file the nail straight across and leave the corner alone, and that a doctor or a podiatrist should look at the ingrown edge. She soaks briefly, cleans gently, and reduces the hard skin in two passes with a file, stopping while the skin is still intact. She does not use a blade, and she does not dig at the corner. She dries between every toe, massages with a light lotion, and applies a thin polish with a capped edge. Sunita is disappointed that the corner is not cut out, but the technician explains that cutting it would make the next nail grow in worse. Two weeks later the redness has settled, and Sunita books a regular pedicure and a separate appointment with a podiatrist.

CAUTION

Never use a blade on a foot, even where the skin looks dead.

Diabetic or numb feet: tidy only or refer

A foot with reduced sensation does not feel the small injuries that a normal foot would report. A client with diabetes, nerve damage, or poor circulation may not notice a nick, a burn from a hot soak, or a blister from a shoe, and a small wound can become a serious one within days. That is why the service changes: a careful cosmetic tidy if the skin is intact, and a referral if it is not. The tidy means filing the

nails, cleaning gently, pushing the cuticle, oiling, and polishing only if the skin is sound. It does not mean deep cleaning, hard-skin removal with a blade, or a long hot soak.

Check sensation in a simple, respectful way. Ask whether the client can feel their feet normally, whether they have had a wound before, and whether a doctor has told them to avoid pedicures. Look at the skin colour, the temperature, and the spaces between the toes. You are not testing with a pin and you are not diagnosing neuropathy; you are gathering enough information to decide whether this foot is safe for a cosmetic service. If the client says they cannot feel much, treat the foot as high risk even if it looks normal. If there is a wound, an ulcer, a blister, or a colour change, do not soak, do not file over it, and refer.

The tools matter more on a high-risk foot. Use a file, not a blade. Keep the soak short or skip it. Do not use a hot towel or a heated boot. Do not push hard into the side wall, and do not dig under the free edge. Dry every toe carefully, because moisture between the toes is a common start of trouble. Use a light lotion rather than a heavy massage, and skip the massage if the skin is fragile or the circulation is poor. Check the skin again at the end of the service, because a nick that happened during filing may not be visible until the dust is wiped away. If you find one, stop, clean, cover, and refer.

The conversation needs to be direct without being frightening. Say that the foot needs a gentler service because it may not feel a small injury, and that a wound on this foot is a doctor's job, not a pedicure. Do not say that the foot is fine when you cannot know that. Do not promise that a polish will protect the nail. Give the client a clear reason to return: a short tidy every few weeks, with a check of the skin each time. Write on the card that the client is diabetic or has reduced sensation, so every technician who follows you treats the foot the same way. Consistency is part of the care.

- 1. Ask directly about diabetes, numbness, poor circulation, and previous foot wounds.
- 2. Look at colour, temperature, and the skin between every toe.
- 3. Do a cosmetic tidy only when the skin is intact.
- 4. Keep the soak short or work dry, and never use a hot soak.
- 5. File the nails and reduce hard skin lightly, with no blade at any stage.
- 6. Do not dig into the side wall or under the free edge.
- 7. Dry every toe, use light lotion, and check the skin again before the client leaves.
- 8. Refer any wound, ulcer, blister, or colour change, and record the advice.

Salon example

A client named Mohan has had diabetes for fifteen years and books a pedicure because his daughter is getting married. He says his feet feel numb most of the time and that he once had a wound that took months to heal. The technician does not soak the feet. She checks the skin between the toes, finds it intact, and explains that she will do a tidy rather than a full pedicure. She files the nails straight across, cleans gently, and pushes the cuticle without pressure. She reduces a little hard skin with a file and stops while the skin is still closed. She dries every toe, applies a light lotion, and skips the massage because the circulation is poor. She checks the skin again at the end and finds no nick. She tells Mohan that a wound on this foot needs a doctor, not a pedicure, and writes the advice on his card. He books a short tidy for six weeks, and the technician notes the plan so the next appointment follows the same routine. The card note includes the six week interval and the no-soak rule, so the next technician follows the same plan.

CAUTION

Numb feet cannot feel your mistakes; tidy only or refer.

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Gel polish



Prep and thin coats

Gel polish lasts because it bonds to a clean, dry plate, and it fails when it bonds to oil, dust, or skin. Prep starts with the cuticle: soften it, push it back, and remove only dead tissue at the edge. Do not cut the living seal, because a cut there will ooze and the product will not sit flat beside it. File the free edge to the shape, then use a soft brush to clear the dust from the side walls and the surface. Wipe the plate with the cleanser the product instructions name, and let it dry. From this point, nothing oily touches the nail: no lotion, no cuticle oil, no hand cream until the top coat is cured.

The base coat goes on thin, in one even layer, with the brush strokes running from the cuticle toward the tip. Keep a small margin at the cuticle so the product does not touch the skin, and cap the free edge with a light pass of the brush. Thin does not mean patchy; it means an even film that the lamp can cure through. A thick base coat cures unevenly, stays soft underneath, and lifts at the edges within a week. If the base looks streaky, smooth it with the brush rather than adding more product. The first layer is the foundation of the whole set, and it is the cheapest place to be patient.

Colour goes on in two thin coats, and the first coat can look slightly sheer. That is normal. A single thick coat looks opaque sooner, but it wrinkles in the lamp, shrinks away from the cuticle, and cures only on the surface. Apply the first coat, cap the edge, and cure for the full time. Apply the second coat the same way, cap the edge again, and cure again. If the colour needs a third coat, use a third thin one rather than a heavy second. Keep the brush moving in the same direction, and do not press hard enough to leave ridges. Between coats, look at the side walls and the cuticle line, and clean any product that has touched skin before it cures.

A clean cuticle gap is not a style choice; it is the difference between a set that lasts and one that lifts. Product that touches the skin bonds to the skin rather than to the plate, and as the skin moves, the seal breaks. Keep a hairline margin all the way around, and check it under the lamp before curing. If gel has touched the skin, wipe it away with a clean brush and the product cleanser, then cure again. Do not flood the gap to hide a short nail or a ragged cuticle line. A slightly larger margin looks deliberate; a flooded line looks bulky and fails first. Learn to see the gap as part of the design.

- 1. Consult, then remove old product with a soak, never with a pry.
- 2. Push the cuticle back, and leave the living seal uncut.
- 3. File the free edge to shape, then brush the dust out of the side walls.
- 4. Wipe the plate with the named cleanser, and keep oil off it until the end.
- 5. Apply a thin base coat, leave a hairline gap, and cap the free edge.

- 6. Cure the base for the full lamp time before the first colour coat.
- 7. Apply two thin colour coats, capping the edge and curing each one fully.
- 8. Check the cuticle line and side walls before the top coat, and clean any skin contact.

Salon example

A client named Alka brings a photo of a milky white gel set and asks for the same look. The technician removes the old polish with a soak, shapes the nails, and pushes the cuticle without cutting. She wipes the plate with cleanser and keeps the bottle of cuticle oil on the far side of the table, out of reach until the end. She applies a thin base coat, caps the edge, and cures it for the full time even though the lamp feels warm and the client is chatting. The first colour coat looks patchy, and Alka asks whether it needs a thicker layer. The technician explains that the second thin coat will cover it and that a thick coat would wrinkle. She applies the second coat, caps the edge, and cures again. She checks the cuticle line under the lamp, finds a tiny dot of gel on the skin, and removes it with a clean brush before the top coat. The set is flat and even, and Alka says it looks like the photo. Three weeks later it has grown but has not peeled.

CAUTION

A thick gel coat can look dry on top and stay soft underneath.

Cap the free edge and cure fully

The free edge is where a gel set begins to fail, because it is the part of the nail that takes the most impact and loses the most moisture. Capping means running the brush along the cut edge of the nail so a thin film of product wraps around it. Do this on the base coat, on every colour coat, and on the top coat. The cap should be thin, because a heavy bead at the tip looks lumpy and can chip away in one piece. A capped edge seals the layers against water and stops the lifting that starts at the tip and travels back toward the cuticle. It takes a few seconds per nail and it is the highest-value habit in the service.

Curing is a chemical reaction, not a drying process, and it needs the full time stated for the product and the lamp. Read the label for the match between the gel and the lamp, and do not assume that every lamp cures every product. Place the hand flat, with the nails facing the light, and do not let the client pull the hand out early to look. If the thumb sits outside the lamp, cure it separately. Replace lamps or bulbs on the schedule the manufacturer gives, because an old lamp still glows while delivering less energy. A lamp that feels warm is not proof of a full cure, and a client who says it is fine is not a substitute for the timer.

Under-cured gel is soft in the middle, and the surface may look perfectly hard. It will wrinkle under pressure, peel at the edge, and sometimes cause a burning or itching sensation days later. If a client reports that the product feels soft or that the lamp stung, check the coat thickness, the lamp, and the cure time before you blame the product. A thick coat needs more energy than a thin one, which is another reason to keep the layers thin. Do not double the time to compensate for a thick coat; remove it and start again. A full cure is cheaper than a removal and a rebuild.

The client's comfort belongs in the curing step. Some clients feel a heat spike as the gel sets, especially on a thin or damaged plate, and some feel it more with a thick coat. Ask before you start whether they have felt this before, and tell them to say if it becomes sharp. If it does, have them lift the hand out, wait a moment, and put it back in, rather than enduring it in silence. That pause does not ruin the cure if the coat is thin and the full time is completed. Never tell a client that pain is normal. It is information about the coat, the plate, or the lamp, and it should change what you do next.

- 1. Read the product label for the lamp match and the stated cure time.
- 2. Place the hand flat so all five nails face the light.
- 3. Cure the base coat for the full time before any colour.
- 4. Cap the free edge thinly on the base, each colour, and the top coat.
- 5. Keep every coat thin, and cure each one for the full time.
- 6. Cure a thumb separately if it sits outside the lamp.
- 7. Replace lamps and bulbs on schedule, and keep a log of the change.
- 8. If the client feels a heat spike, pause, then finish the full cure.

Salon example

A client named Rohan books a gel manicure before a job interview and asks for a dark blue that will not chip. The technician applies a thin base, caps the edge, and cures it fully. She applies two thin colour coats, capping each one, and checks the timer each time rather than counting in her head. Rohan says the lamp feels hot on the second coat and asks her to take the hand out early. She explains that the heat comes from the gel setting and that pulling out early would leave the coat soft, so she has him lift the hand for a few seconds and then put it back for the rest of the time. She cures the top coat fully and checks the edge with her thumbnail. At the end she tells him to keep the nails dry for a few hours and to book a removal rather than peeling if an edge lifts. The set survives the interview and two weeks of typing, and the only wear is a small smooth spot at one tip. He also books the removal at three weeks, before the edge has a chance to lift.

CAUTION

An uncapped edge and a short cure are the two fastest routes to peeling.

Soak off, never pry

Removal starts with the top coat, not with a metal tool. File the surface of the top coat to break the seal, taking care to stay on the product and off the natural plate. Then soak a cotton pad in the remover named for that gel, place it on the nail, and wrap the finger in foil or a clip so the pad stays in contact. Wait the full soak time. The product should look dull, soft, and slightly lifted at the edges when it is ready. If it is still firm, wrap it again rather than reaching for a pusher. A second soak costs minutes; a pried nail costs weeks of thin, peeling plate.

When the product is soft, remove it with a gentle pusher or an orange stick, working from the edge inward and keeping the tool almost flat against the product. Do not dig under the product to lift it. Do not scrape the plate to get the last patch. If a small amount remains, re-wrap that nail and wait again. After removal, wipe the nail, look at the plate for white spots, bends, or separation, and oil the nail and the cuticle. If the plate looks thin or feels sensitive, do not apply a new set that day; offer a rest, a strengthener, or a plain polish, and book the next gel for a later date.

Prying is the most common cause of long-term nail damage in a salon. Gel bonds to the plate, and when it is levered off before it is soft, it takes layers of keratin with it. The plate becomes thin, bends under pressure, and peels in sheets. The client feels the damage for weeks after the gel is gone, and the next set lifts early because the surface is uneven and weak. The damage is not always visible in the chair. A plate can look normal and still be thin enough to flex, and flexing is what breaks the seal on the next application. This is why the rule is absolute: soak off, never pry.

Removal is also a chance to inspect. Look at every nail with the product gone, and compare the ten. Check for green staining, separation, a new dark line, or a crumbly edge. If you find something you would not cover, say so now, while the nail is bare and the client can see it. Explain that the nail needs a rest or a referral, and resist the request to put a fresh set on immediately to hide it. The removal appointment is the moment when the salon's honesty is most visible, because the client is looking at the same ten nails you are. Use it to teach, not to sell.

- 1. File the top coat to break the seal, staying off the natural plate.
- 2. Soak a pad in the correct remover and wrap it firmly on the nail.
- 3. Wait the full soak time, and check whether the product has softened.
- 4. Re-wrap a nail that is still firm instead of reaching for a tool.
- 5. Remove soft product with a pusher held almost flat, working inward.
- 6. Never lever, chip, bite, or scrape the product off the plate.
- 7. Inspect all ten nails after removal, and note anything you would not cover.
- 8. Oil the nails and cuticles, and book a rest day if the plate is thin.

Salon example

A client named Tanya comes in with a gel set that is five weeks old and two nails that have already been picked at home. The technician files the top coat, wraps all ten nails, and sets a timer. When the timer goes, eight nails are ready and two are still firm at the edge. She re-wraps those two and waits again. Tanya says she is in a hurry and asks the technician to just lift the last of it with the pusher. The technician refuses, explains that the product is still bonded, and shows her the white marks on the nails she picked at home, where layers of plate came away with the gel. She finishes the removal gently, oils the nails, and recommends a two week rest with a strengthener instead of a new set. Tanya is not pleased, but she books the rest appointment, and at the next visit the plate looks smoother. The technician writes the removal date and the rest advice on the card, and Tanya stops picking at her gel between appointments. Tanya leaves with a small bottle of oil and a removal booked for four weeks.

CAUTION

If you have to force it, it is not ready to come off.

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Gel and acrylic structure



Liquid and powder, hard gel, builder gel

Liquid and powder, often called acrylic, is made by mixing a monomer liquid with a polymer powder. The two react chemically, and the bead sets without a lamp. The technician controls the mix ratio: too wet, and the bead floods the cuticle and shrinks as it sets; too dry, and it drags, looks chalky, and breaks. A workable bead looks like a small bead of honey that holds its shape on the brush. Press and pat it into place rather than pumping the brush, because pumping pushes air into the product and leaves bubbles that weaken the structure. Once set, the surface is filed, and the filing is where the shape and the apex are refined.

Hard gel and builder gel are cured with a lamp rather than mixed with a powder. Hard gel is used for structure and does not soak off easily; builder gel is thicker and is used for overlays, short extensions, and strengthening natural nails. Both need thin layers and a full cure, and both stay where they are placed, which means placement matters more than gravity. They do not smell of monomer, and they usually feel lighter on the nail, but they are not automatically gentler: a gel that touches the skin can still cause a reaction, and a thick layer can still under-cure. Read the product instructions, because the names are used loosely across brands.

Four principles apply to all three systems. First, the mix ratio or the layer thickness must be even, because uneven product cures or sets unevenly and fails at the thin spot. Second, no wet product goes on the skin, because uncured monomer and uncured gel are the most common causes of allergic reaction and lifting. Third, structure is not thickness: a well-placed apex supports the nail, while a thick, flat layer adds weight without strength. Fourth, the removal method must match the product, because acetone that is right for one system is useless for another and a file that is right for one can damage the plate under a third.

Allergy deserves its own paragraph, because it ends careers and clients' ability to wear product. Repeated skin contact with uncured methacrylates can sensitise a person, and once sensitised, the reaction can spread to the face, the eyelids, and the neck. It is not a rash to work through; it is a permanent change. Keep product off the skin, do not double-dip a brush, do not use expired monomer, keep the lid on, and ventilate the room. If a client reports itching, redness, or swelling after a set, remove the product, do not apply more, and refer. If a technician develops a rash, she should stop working with the product and see a doctor, not tape over it.

- 1. Read the product instructions for the mix ratio, layer thickness, and cure time.
- 2. Mix a bead that holds its shape, and do not use a wet bead near the skin.

- 3. Press and pat acrylic into place instead of pumping the brush.
- 4. Apply hard gel and builder gel in thin layers, and cure each one fully.
- 5. Keep every product off the skin, and clean the cuticle gap before it sets.
- 6. Build structure over the stress area rather than adding bulk everywhere.
- 7. Match the removal method to the system on the nail.
- 8. Ventilate the room, keep lids on, and treat a rash as a reason to stop.

Salon example

A client named Farida has worn acrylic for years and wants to try builder gel because she is tired of the smell. The technician explains that the two systems behave differently: acrylic sets in the air and is built with a bead, while builder gel stays where it is placed and needs a lamp. She checks that the client has no history of itching or swelling, then removes the old acrylic by filing it thin and soaking the last layer, without prying. She applies a thin base, a structure layer of builder gel over the stress area, and cures it fully. The first attempt looks a little flat at the apex, so she adds a small amount of product in the right place and cures again rather than making the whole nail thicker. Farida says the nail feels lighter than her acrylic sets. The technician writes the system and the cure time on the card, and at the fill she uses the same products rather than mixing systems without a reason. Farida books the fill at three weeks, and the technician uses the same builder gel so the structure stays predictable.

CAUTION

Wet product on the skin is how allergies begin; keep the margin clean.

Structure is not thickness

Structure means the shape of the product across the nail: thin at the cuticle, a gentle arch over the stress area, thin at the side walls, and a little strength at the free edge. Thickness means more product everywhere, which adds weight, looks bulky, and does not prevent breaks. A thick, flat nail still snaps at the stress point because there is no arch to spread the impact. A thinner nail with a well-placed apex can survive a knock that would crack a heavy one. When a client asks for a stronger set, the answer is usually better structure and a shorter length, not another layer of product.

The apex sits over the stress area, roughly the middle of the nail and slightly toward the free edge, where the nail bends most when it is pressed. Build it by placing product in that zone and letting it settle into a curve, or by patting acrylic into a subtle dome. The highest point should be smooth, not a lump, and the transition toward the cuticle should be thin enough that the natural nail shows through a clear product. On a short nail the apex is subtle; on a long enhancement it is more pronounced. The apex also needs to be in the right place: too far back, and the free edge levers; too far forward, and the stress point has no support.

The side walls and the free edge complete the structure. The side walls should follow the natural side wall and tuck in slightly, not flare out where they catch on everything. The free edge needs a little product, not a paper-thin rim, because a thin edge chips and a thick edge looks like a shelf. The curve

across the nail, called the c-curve, should be gentle and consistent; a flat cross-section bends more easily than a curved one. Look at the nail from the side and from the tip, not only from above. A structure that looks right from the technician's seat can be visibly flat from the client's side of the table.

Filing after the product sets is where structure is either kept or destroyed. File the surface to refine the shape, but do not file the apex down to make the nail look slimmer, because that removes the support and leaves a flat, weak nail. At a fill, check whether the apex has moved forward with growth; if it has, rebuild it rather than adding colour on top of a structure that no longer works. If the structure cannot be rebuilt without removing the set, say so and book the removal. A client would rather hear that at the start than discover it when the nail snaps.

- 1. Look at the nail from the side before you build, and note where it bends.
- 2. Place the apex over the stress area, slightly toward the free edge.
- 3. Keep the product thin at the cuticle and thin at the side walls.
- 4. Give the free edge a little product rather than a paper-thin rim.
- 5. Keep the cross-section curved and consistent from side to side.
- 6. Cure or set each layer before adding the next, and keep the layers thin.
- 7. File to refine the shape, never to flatten the apex.
- 8. At a fill, rebuild a migrated apex instead of covering it with colour.

Salon example

A client named Leela has a set of clear hard gel extensions that keep breaking at the same spot on both middle fingers. The technician looks at the nails from the side and sees that the apex is almost flat and sits too far back, near the cuticle, while the free edge is thick. The break is happening at the stress point, exactly where the structure is weakest. She explains that the nails are not too thin; they are badly shaped, and adding more product would make them heavier without making them stronger. She removes the two broken nails, rebuilds them with a proper apex over the stress area, and keeps the length slightly shorter. On the other eight, she files the surface to bring the apex forward without thinning the plate. She shows Leela the profile from the side before and after, and Leela can see the difference. At the two week check, neither rebuilt nail has cracked, and the technician books a fill at three weeks to keep the apex in place as the nail grows. Leela also changes the length by two millimetres, which matters more than any extra layer of product.

CAUTION

An apex filed into the surface is a shape, not structure.

Removal method matches the product

Each system comes off in its own way. Gel polish is designed to soak off, so it is filed lightly on the top coat and wrapped in remover until it lifts. Acrylic is usually filed down thin and then soaked, or filed off

completely by an experienced hand, depending on the product and the shop's rules. Hard gel may need to be filed thin and soaked for a long time, or filed off, and some hard gels are not designed to soak at all. Builder gel sits somewhere in between, and the brand instructions decide which method applies. Guessing is how plates get damaged, so keep the instructions with the product and follow them.

A mismatch is expensive. Soaking a product that does not soak wastes twenty minutes and leaves the client with wet, softened nails and product still attached. Filing a product that should be soaked removes plate along with the product, especially at the edges where the natural nail is thin. Using a coarse bit on the plate to save time leaves grooves that never grow out evenly and that show through the next set. Using acetone on a plate that is already dry makes it drier and more brittle. The removal method is part of the product choice, not an afterthought, and it should be decided before the first set is applied.

An electric file is a tool with a sharp learning curve. Use it on product, not on the natural plate, and keep it moving so it does not sit in one spot and generate heat. Choose a bit for the job, keep the speed modest, and work in the direction the bit is designed for. Stop if the client feels heat, because heat means friction and friction means damage. Wear a mask and use extraction, because the dust is a lung irritant and a sensitizer. Never use a bit near the cuticle or the side wall to chase a last fragment. If the product is close to the skin, finish with a hand file or a soak.

After removal, the nail needs a plan. Oil it, look at the plate, and decide whether it can take a new set today. A plate that is thin, flexible, or white at the surface needs a rest, even if the client wants a fresh set immediately. Offer a strengthener, a plain polish, or a short break, and book the next enhancement for a later date. Write the removal method and the condition of the plate on the card, so the next technician knows what the nail has been through. A removal that ends with a healthy plate and a clear plan is a service in itself, and clients remember it when they decide where to book next.

- 1. Identify the product on the nail before you plan the removal.
- 2. Follow the brand instructions for soak time, filing, or both.
- 3. File the top coat or the bulk of the product, and stay off the natural plate.
- 4. Use the correct remover, and re-wrap rather than forcing a stubborn patch.
- 5. Keep the electric file moving, at a modest speed, and stop if it feels hot.
- 6. Never use a bit to chase product at the cuticle or side wall.
- 7. Oil the nails after removal and inspect the plate on all ten.
- 8. Record the method and the plate condition, and book a rest if it is thin.

Salon example

A client named Simran has moved from another city and arrives with a set of hard gel that she has had for four weeks. She asks for a soak off, because that is what her last salon did. The technician looks at the product, files a small corner to see how it behaves, and explains that this gel is a hard gel that will not lift with a short soak. She offers two options: a long soak with filing, or filing down and finishing by hand. Simran chooses the long soak because she is worried about the file. The technician files the top layer, wraps the nails, and waits, then re-wraps the ones that are still firm. She removes the softened product with a pusher held flat and does not lever. After removal she oils the nails and sees that two plates are thin and white at the tip. She recommends a two week rest and writes it on the card. Simran books the rest, and the technician notes the product name so the next removal is planned correctly. The card note also records the product name, so the next removal is planned before the set goes on.

CAUTION

The wrong removal does more damage than the product ever did.

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Enhancements



Apex and the stress area

An enhancement is a small structure, and like any structure it needs to carry load to the right place. The apex is the highest point of the product, built over the stress area, which is roughly the middle of the nail and slightly toward the free edge. When the nail is pressed or knocked, the force travels through the apex and spreads into the sides instead of concentrating at one line. Without an apex, the product is a flat sheet, and a flat sheet cracks at the point where it bends. With an apex that is too far back, the free edge acts as a lever and the stress lands at the cuticle, where the seal is weakest.

Build the apex deliberately. With acrylic, place the bead in the stress zone and pat it into a dome, keeping the product away from the cuticle and the side walls. With gel, place a small amount in the same zone and let it settle before curing, or use a structure layer and cure it in stages. The highest point should feel smooth under the finger, not like a lump. The transition from the apex toward the cuticle should be gradual, so the product thins to a hairline at the base. The free edge should have enough product to resist chipping but not so much that it looks like a shelf. Check the profile from the side after every layer.

A bad apex has a few recognisable shapes. A flat nail has no dome at all, and it flexes when pressed. A back-weighted nail has the high point near the cuticle, and it lifts there or snaps across the middle. A tip-heavy nail has a thick free edge and a thin middle, and it breaks at the stress line. A lumpy apex has a high spot that was never smoothed, and it catches on everything. Each of these is a structure problem, not a product problem, and each is fixed by rebuilding rather than by adding more product on top. Learn to see the profile from the side before the client leaves the chair.

The apex also changes with length and with the client's work. A short overlay needs only a subtle apex, because there is little lever arm. A long extension needs a more pronounced apex and a shorter length if the hands are busy. A client who types all day puts repeated small loads on the tips, and a client who lifts boxes puts sudden heavy loads on the stress area. Ask about both, and build for the heavier one. If the client wants a length that the apex cannot support, say so before you start. A structure that is honest about its limits lasts longer than one that pretends to be stronger than it is.

- 1. Find the stress area before you place any product.
- 2. Build the apex over that area, slightly toward the free edge.
- 3. Keep the product thin at the cuticle and thin at the side walls.
- 4. Pat acrylic into a smooth dome instead of pumping the brush.
- 5. Cure gel in thin layers so the apex sets all the way through.

- 6. Check the side profile after every layer, and correct it early.
- 7. Match the apex to the length and to the client's daily work.
- 8. Rebuild a bad apex instead of covering it with colour.

Salon example

A client named Anjali wants long almond extensions for a family photo shoot. The technician builds the first nail, cures it, and looks at the profile from the side. The apex is too far back, close to the cuticle, and the free edge is heavy. She does not add more product to hide it. She removes the layer with a file, rebuilds the apex over the stress area, and shortens the length by two millimetres. The second attempt has a gentle dome and a lighter tip. She shows Anjali the side view and explains that the first version would have lifted at the base within a week. She builds the other nine the same way, checking each one from the side before moving on. The photo shoot goes well, and Anjali returns after three weeks with no lifts and no cracks. At the fill, the technician moves the apex forward as the nail has grown, rather than filing colour over the old shape. Anjali books a fill at three weeks, and the technician keeps the side view check in every appointment.

CAUTION

An apex filed into the surface is a shape, not structure.

Side walls and the cuticle gap

The side walls are where an enhancement meets the skin, and they decide whether the set feels comfortable and whether it lifts. The product should follow the natural side wall and tuck in slightly, so the edge is not wider than the nail. A side wall that flares out catches on clothing, hair, and drawers, and the first knock levers the product away from the plate. A side wall that is filed too narrow looks pinched and puts stress on the corner. Keep the line smooth from the cuticle to the free edge, and check it from the tip of the finger as well as from above. The client feels a sharp side wall before they see it.

The cuticle gap is the hairline margin between the product and the skin at the base. It exists for two reasons: the skin moves, and the product does not, so a product that touches the skin will be pushed away as the hand works; and uncured product on the skin is a sensitizer. Keep the gap clean before the product sets or cures. With acrylic, clean the edge with a brush or an orange stick before the bead hardens. With gel, wipe any product that has touched the skin with a clean brush before curing. Do not flood the gap to make the nail look longer or to hide a ragged cuticle line. A clean margin looks deliberate and lasts.

Side walls and cuticle gaps fail for predictable reasons. Product on the skin lifts first, because it bonds to the skin rather than to the plate. A gap that is too small leaves no room for growth, so the product is pushed up within days. A gap that is too large looks like a regrowth line on day one and collects dirt. A side wall that is too wide catches, and a side wall that is too narrow cracks. The fix is not more product but better placement. Watch the product as it settles, and correct the edge while it is still

movable. After it sets, the only correction is a file, and a file cannot put back a seal that was never there.

Finishing is part of the structure. After the product sets, refine the side walls with a file held at a shallow angle, and keep the natural plate untouched. Smooth the transition at the cuticle so the client cannot feel a ridge when they run a finger over it. Check the underside of the free edge for sharp corners. Look at all ten nails together, because a side wall that looks fine on its own can look uneven next to its neighbour. Then ask the client to feel the edges. If they can feel a sharp point, it will catch on something before the week is out, and it is cheaper to fix now than to repair a lifted nail later.

- 1. Follow the natural side wall, and tuck the product in slightly.
- 2. Keep the side wall no wider than the natural nail at the widest point.
- 3. Leave a hairline gap at the cuticle, wide enough for growth.
- 4. Clean acrylic away from the skin before the bead hardens.
- 5. Wipe gel off the skin with a clean brush before curing.
- 6. Never flood the cuticle gap to hide a shape or a ragged line.
- 7. File the finished side wall at a shallow angle, off the natural plate.
- 8. Ask the client to feel the edges, and smooth anything sharp before they leave.

Salon example

A client named Neha has a set of acrylics that keep lifting at the sides of her index fingers. The technician looks closely and sees that the product flares out beyond the natural side wall on both hands. The flare catches on her sleeves and on the edge of her phone case, and each knock opens the seal a little more. The technician removes the lifted product, cleans and dries the plate, and rebuilds the side walls so they follow the natural line. She keeps the cuticle gap a little wider than before, because Neha's nails grow quickly and the old gap had closed within a week. She cleans the edges with an orange stick before the acrylic sets and checks each nail from the tip. Neha says the set feels narrower and more comfortable. At the two week check there is no lift, and the technician notes the faster growth pattern so the next fill is booked a few days earlier. Neha also stops carrying her phone against that hand, which was part of why the flare caught so often.

CAUTION

Product on the cuticle or side wall will lift first, every time.

Never fill over a lift

A lift is a separation between the product and the natural nail, and it shows as a shadow, a white edge, or a slight movement when you press. It happens for reasons that are usually visible: product on the skin, a gap that was too small, a knock, a soft plate, or a set left on too long. Under the lift there is a pocket, and the pocket holds water, soap, dust, and bacteria. If you fill over that pocket, the new

product bonds to the old product and to the edge of the gap, not to a clean plate. The lift continues underneath, the pocket grows, and the next knock takes the whole set with it.

A fill over a lift also hides a problem you have not seen. The plate under a lift can be stained, soft, or separated, and a cover keeps it dark and damp. That is how a small green stain becomes a larger one, and how a nail that could have been cleaned and dried becomes a nail that needs a referral. The correct procedure is to remove the lifted product, clean the area, dry it, and look at the plate. If the plate is sound and the colour is normal, re-prepare and rebuild. If the plate is green, crumbly, painful, or separated, do not cover it; refer, and leave it open. There is no cosmetic shortcut that is worth a bacterial pocket.

Removing a lift needs the same care as a full removal. File the product thin around the lifted area, then soak the remaining product or lift it gently with a pusher once it is soft. Do not slide a metal tool under the product and lever it, because that is how the plate is torn. Do not drill into the gap to clean it, because the bit can catch the skin. Clean with a soft brush and the appropriate cleanser, dry thoroughly, and inspect. If the plate looks healthy, the area can be re-prepped with a light buff and rebuilt. If the client is in a hurry and asks you to skip the removal, explain that a fill over a lift is a temporary look with a guaranteed repair.

The client conversation is easier when you show the lift rather than describe it. Hold the finger so they can see the shadow, press gently and let them see the movement, and explain that water is getting in. Give them the plan: removal today, a rebuild if the plate is sound, or a rest and a referral if it is not. If they have an event, offer to do the other nails and keep the affected one simple and bare, or shorten the set and remove the lifted section. Do not promise that a fill will hold until the weekend. It might, but if it does not, the client will remember the promise and not the explanation.

- 1. Check every nail for a lift before you start a fill, including the ones that look fine.
- 2. Press gently and look for a shadow, a white edge, or movement.
- 3. File the product thin around the lift before you try to remove it.
- 4. Soak the remaining product, and lift it only when it is soft.
- 5. Never lever with a metal tool or drill into the gap.
- 6. Clean and dry the plate, then inspect the colour and the surface.
- 7. Rebuild only if the plate is sound; refer if it is green, crumbly, or painful.
- 8. Explain the plan before you start, and do not promise a fill will hold.

Salon example

A client named Poonam comes for a fill four weeks after her last appointment. Two nails have lifted at the cuticle, and she asks the technician to fill them quickly because she has a meeting in the afternoon. The technician shows her the shadow under the product and explains that filling over it would trap water. She removes the lifted product on both nails, soaks the last layer, and cleans the plate. One plate looks healthy, so she re-preps and rebuilds it. The other has a small green patch near the side wall, and she does not cover it. She refers Poonam to a doctor if it spreads or becomes painful, and leaves the nail bare. She fills the remaining eight nails and books a review in a week. Poonam is annoyed about the bare nail, but at the review the green has faded and the plate is firm. The technician rebuilds that nail then, and notes on the card that the set had been left four weeks, so the next fill is booked at three. The card note also records the three week interval, and the booking desk offers it at the next visit.

CAUTION

A lift is an open door; filling over it closes the door with the water inside.

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Breakage



Over-filing

Over-filing is the quiet injury of the trade. The plate gets thinner with every pass, and because the plate has no nerves, the client does not feel it happening. The first sign is often heat under the file, then a white patch at the edge, then a nail that bends when pressed. A thin plate flexes under the product, and flexing breaks the seal at the edge. The set lifts, the client picks at it, and the next appointment begins with a nail that is already damaged. By the time the damage is visible, several services may have contributed to it, which is why the habit is so hard to trace.

Technicians over-file for understandable reasons. A lift has to be removed, a shape has to be corrected, a set has to come off before the next client arrives, and a coarse bit cuts faster than a hand file. Each of those reasons is real, and none of them justifies taking plate. The rule is simple: file product, not the natural nail. Stop at the line where the product ends and the plate begins, and change to a finer grit as you get close. A coarse file on the natural plate leaves grooves that catch the light and never grow out evenly. A drill on the plate does the same thing faster and with more heat.

Check the tools and the pressure, not only the hand. A worn file still looks like a file but cuts unevenly, and a bit that is clogged with dust generates heat instead of removing product. Keep the file moving, use light pressure, and let the grit do the work. On a natural nail, use a fine grit and short strokes, and keep the file flat rather than angled into the edge. On product, use the coarseness the product needs, then finish by hand near the cuticle. If the client says the file feels hot, stop, let the nail cool, and change to a gentler tool. Heat is friction, and friction is damage.

Recovery takes time and honesty. A plate that has been over-filed needs a rest from product, a strengthener if the shop uses one, oil daily, and a shorter length. Do not apply a new set to make it look better, because the new product will lift from the thin surface and the cycle will repeat. Tell the client what happened without blaming a colleague, and give a realistic timeline: a fingernail grows out in four to six months, and the thin section has to travel to the tip before it is gone. Book a review in two weeks, then a month, and check the plate each time. The client will respect the plan more than a quick cover.

- 1. Watch for heat, white patches, bending, and sensitivity at every visit.
- 2. File product only, and stop at the line where the plate begins.
- 3. Change to a finer grit as you approach the natural nail.
- 4. Keep the file moving with light pressure, and keep the bit clean.
- 5. Never use a coarse bit or a worn file on the natural plate.

- 6. If the nail feels hot, stop and switch to a gentler tool.
- 7. Rest the plate from product, oil it daily, and keep the length short.
- 8. Review in two weeks, then a month, and record the plate condition.

Salon example

A client named Shalini has worn gel for a year without a break, and her nails have started to bend when she types. The technician removes the set and sees white patches near the free edge on six nails and a surface that looks polished but feels flexible. She asks about the last few appointments and learns that the previous technician used a drill to remove the gel each time because it was faster. She explains that the plate has been thinned, that the white patches are where layers have come away, and that a new set today would lift from the weak surface. She offers a rest: a strengthener, oil daily, a shorter length, and no gel for four weeks. Shalini is reluctant because her nails look uneven without colour. The technician offers a plain polish that can be removed with a gentle solvent, and books a review in two weeks. At the review the plate looks smoother, and at six weeks the white patches have grown toward the tip. Shalini returns to gel after eight weeks, and the technician removes it by soaking rather than drilling.

CAUTION

Heat during filing is a warning, not a normal part of the service.

No apex

When an enhancement has no apex, it breaks at the stress line. The stress line is the place where the nail bends most, roughly the middle of the nail and slightly toward the free edge, and without a dome of product above it, the force of a knock concentrates there. The crack usually starts at a side wall and runs across, or it snaps cleanly at the same point on several nails. Clients often describe it as the nail being weak, and they ask for a thicker layer. Thickness is not the answer. The missing piece is the arch, and until it is rebuilt, the same break will happen again.

A missing apex is easy to see from the side. The nail looks flat, like a ruler, with the same thickness from cuticle to tip. When you press the free edge gently, the whole nail flexes instead of resisting. From above, the surface may look perfect, which is why the problem survives so many appointments. Apex is also lost at the fill: as the nail grows, the high point moves forward, and a technician who only adds colour at the base leaves the structure behind. A fill that does not rebuild the apex is a colour service, not a structural one, and the break is already on its way.

The fix is to rebuild, not to patch. Patching means putting product over the crack or over the weak zone, which hides the damage and adds weight without support. Rebuilding means removing the product in the stress area, checking the plate, and placing a new apex in the right position. If the crack has reached the plate, the nail may need to be shortened and the product removed entirely before rebuilding. If the plate is sound, the rebuild can happen in one appointment, with thin layers and a full cure. Tell the client what you are doing and why, because the difference between a patch and a rebuild is visible in how long the set lasts, not in the conversation at the desk.

Prevention belongs at application and at every fill. At application, place the apex before the product sets, and check the side profile before the client leaves. At the fill, look at where the high point sits now, and move it back to the stress area as the nail has grown. If the set is too long for the new structure, shorten it. If the client's work has changed, for example a new job with heavy lifting, rebuild for the new load. Apex is not a one-time step; it is a maintenance item, and the technician who checks it every visit has fewer repairs and fewer lost clients.

- 1. Look at the side profile of every enhancement, not only the surface.
- 2. Press the free edge gently and see whether the nail flexes.
- 3. Mark where the stress line sits on this client's nail.
- 4. Build the apex over that line, slightly toward the free edge.
- 5. At a fill, check whether the apex has moved forward with growth.
- 6. Rebuild a migrated apex instead of adding colour over it.
- 7. Shorten the length if the structure can no longer support it.
- 8. Record the apex position and the length so the next fill starts correctly.

Salon example

A client named Rhea has had three repairs on the same nail in two months, always at the same line across the middle. The technician examines the nail from the side and sees a flat profile with a thick tip and a thin middle. She explains that the break is not bad luck and not a weak nail; the structure is missing an apex. She removes the product on that nail, checks the plate, and finds it sound. She rebuilds it with a clear apex over the stress area and shortens the free edge by three millimetres. She also checks the other nine and finds that the apex on each has moved forward with growth, so she files the surface and adds a small amount of product at the base to bring the structure back. She shows Rhea the side view of the rebuilt nail and explains what to look for at home. At the next fill there are no new cracks, and Rhea books a three week interval instead of waiting for a repair. Rhea also keeps the length shorter for two cycles, and the same break does not return.

CAUTION

Patching a stress fracture without rebuilding the apex invites the same break.

Peeling gel

Peeling gel usually starts at an edge and travels inward, lifting in thin sheets rather than breaking cleanly. The cause is almost always one of five things: the plate was not clean or dry, the coats were too thick, the free edge was not capped, a coat was under-cured, or the client picked at it. A thick coat cures on the surface and stays soft below, so the whole layer can peel away like a sticker. A missed cap leaves the tip exposed, and water gets between the layers. Oil or lotion on the plate before the base coat prevents the bond from forming at all. None of these is a mystery, and each has a fix.

The wrong response is to fill over the peeled edge, glue it down, or add another layer of colour. A peeled edge is an open layer, and product applied over it bonds to the old gel rather than to the plate. The peel continues underneath, and the new layer hides it until the whole patch comes away, often at a worse moment. Glue is worse still: it is not designed for nails, it traps moisture, and it makes the eventual removal harder. If the client has already picked or glued at home, do not scold them. Look at what happened, explain the cause, and remove the product properly.

The correct repair is a removal and an inspection. Soak off the gel, clean and dry the plate, and look for damage. If the plate is sound, re-prep carefully, apply thin coats, cap every layer, and cure each one for the full time. If the plate is thin or white, give it a rest and book the next set later. If the peel was caused by the client's habits, for example using nails to open cans or picking at an edge, give one clear instruction rather than a lecture: book a removal instead of peeling, and keep the nails out of packaging. A repair that does not address the cause will peel again in the same place.

Prevention is a checklist, not a hope. Clean and dehydrate the plate, apply thin coats, cap the free edge on every layer, cure fully, and check the cuticle line before the client leaves. Ask about the last set: how long it lasted, where it lifted first, and whether it was picked. If the same client has peeling every time, watch her application and her aftercare rather than blaming the product. Sometimes the cause is the lamp, sometimes the primer, sometimes the way the hand sits in the lamp. Change one variable at a time and note the result. That is how a recurring problem becomes a solved one.

- 1. Ask where the peeling started and how long the set lasted.
- 2. Remove the product with a soak instead of filling over the edge.
- 3. Inspect the plate for thin spots, white patches, and separation.
- 4. Re-prep with a clean, dry plate and no oil on the surface.
- 5. Apply thin coats, and cap the free edge on every layer.
- 6. Cure each coat for the full lamp time, including the top coat.
- 7. Rest a thin plate instead of applying a new set over it.
- 8. Give one clear aftercare instruction and book the next removal.

Salon example

A client named Isha returns after ten days with gel peeling from the tips of both thumbs. The technician asks how the set has been and learns that Isha has been opening her daughter's lunchbox with her thumbnail. She also notices that the peeling starts at the free edge, which suggests the cap was thin or missing. She removes the gel with a soak, inspects the plate, and finds it healthy. She re-preps, applies thin coats, and caps the edge on the base, both colour coats, and the top coat, checking each one. She shows Isha the capped edge and explains that the tip is where water gets in. She also offers a practical alternative for the lunchbox: use the side of the thumb or a spoon, and book a repair if an edge lifts rather than picking it. Isha returns three weeks later with the set intact except for normal growth, and the technician books her next removal at three weeks rather than four. Isha also puts a fine file in her bag, and leaves the lunchbox to a spoon rather than a thumbnail.

CAUTION

Do not fill over a peeled edge; remove it and find the cause.

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Maintenance calendar



Two weeks for gel polish

Gel polish looks best for about two weeks. Fingernails grow roughly three millimetres a month, which is about a millimetre a week, so by day fourteen there is a visible line of new growth at the base. The product itself may still be intact, but the margin at the cuticle has changed, and the balance of the nail has shifted. A set that is left for four weeks is not twice as good value; it is a set with a wider gap, more leverage at the tip, and a higher chance of a lift when the client knocks it. The two week marker is a guide, not a rule, but it is a useful one for most clients.

Book the next appointment before the client leaves, and write the date on the card. Two weeks suits a client whose nails grow quickly, who works with her hands, or who wants the cuticle line to stay clean. Three weeks suits a client with slower growth or a set that is holding well. Four weeks is usually too long for gel polish, and if a client insists on it, explain what will happen at the edges and check the set carefully at the next visit. The interval should match the growth, the work, and the season, not the shop's quiet days.

Events change the calendar. For a wedding, a shoot, or a holiday, book the finish two or three days before, not the day before, so there is room to fix a chip or a reaction. Book the removal for after the event, and do not let a set run for a month because the client was away. If the client is travelling, a shorter length and a simple finish are safer than a long set that will catch on luggage. Put the event date on the card and work backward from it. The client will remember that the timing was planned, not improvised.

The calendar is also a record of the nail's history. If a client always needs a repair at day ten, the interval is too long or the structure is wrong. If a set lasts three weeks without a lift, the prep and the aftercare are working. Note the interval, the product, the shape, and any repair, and look at the pattern every few months. A maintenance calendar is not administration for its own sake; it is how a technician learns what this client's nails do, which is more useful than any general rule. The client who sees that you remember will trust the next recommendation.

- 1. Book the next appointment before the client leaves the chair.
- 2. Write the date, the interval, and the product on the client card.
- 3. Use two weeks for gel polish on most clients, and three for slower growth.
- 4. Explain what a four week set does to the cuticle line and the tip.
- 5. Book event nails two or three days before, not the day before.

- 6. Book the removal after the event, and keep travel sets short and simple.
- 7. Note every repair and look for a pattern in the interval.
- 8. Adjust the interval to growth, work, and season rather than to habit.

Salon example

A client named Rupa books a gel set for a holiday in six weeks and asks for the longest lasting option. The technician explains that gel polish looks best for about two weeks, and that a set applied the day before a flight will have a fresh cuticle line but will also be under pressure from luggage, sun cream, and swimming. She suggests applying the set three days before the trip, keeping the length short, and booking a removal for the day after she returns. She also offers a small bottle of cuticle oil and a file for the trip. Rupa agrees, and the technician writes the dates on the card. Rupa returns with a set that has grown but not lifted, and the removal takes twenty minutes. She says the short length was the right call because she spent the week in the sea. The technician notes the interval and the holiday dates, and the next set is booked for two weeks after the return. The card note also includes the flight date, so the next booking is planned around it.

CAUTION

A gel set is a two week service, not a permanent one; book it that way.

Fills before the grow-out becomes a lever

An enhancement needs a fill every two to three weeks, depending on growth and work. The reason is not appearance; it is mechanics. As the nail grows, the apex moves forward with it, and the balance of the structure changes. The product that was over the stress area is now closer to the tip, and the new growth at the base has no product support. The result is a lever: the free edge is longer, the apex is in the wrong place, and a knock that the nail would have absorbed two weeks ago now snaps it at the stress line. A fill before that point is cheaper than a repair after it.

Watch for the signs that the fill is due. The cuticle gap has become a visible band of new growth. The product at the base feels thin or flexible. The apex no longer sits over the stress area when you look from the side. The client reports that a nail feels different, or that a corner catches. Any of these means the structure needs attention, even if the set still looks good from above. Do not wait for a lift to book the fill, because a lift is already a failure, and the repair will take longer than the fill would have.

Some clients stretch the interval because they are busy or because they want to save the appointment. Explain the lever in plain words: the longer the set stays, the further the support moves from where it is needed. If they cannot come at three weeks, offer a shorter length at the previous visit so the set can survive an extra week. If a set has already gone too long, do not simply fill it. Remove the product in the stress area, check the plate, rebuild the apex, and shorten the length. A fill that ignores a moved apex is a colour change, not maintenance.

The calendar should also include a rest. After a long run of enhancements, many clients benefit from a week or two without product, with oil and a strengthener. Suggest it before the plate looks thin, not after it breaks. Some clients will refuse, and that is their choice, but the suggestion should be made. A client who alternates between sets and short rests tends to have stronger nails over a year than one who never takes a break. Note the last rest on the card so the recommendation is based on the client's history, not on a general rule. That conversation is easier when the card already shows the interval the client has been keeping.

- 1. Book fills every two to three weeks, based on growth and daily work.
- 2. Check the apex position at every visit, from the side.
- 3. Treat a visible band of new growth as a signal that the fill is due.
- 4. Do not wait for a lift before booking the fill.
- 5. Shorten the length if the client needs to stretch the interval.
- 6. Rebuild the apex and the structure instead of filling over a moved one.
- 7. Suggest a short rest after a long run of enhancements.
- 8. Record the interval, the rest, and the repairs on the client card.

Salon example

A client named Megha has been coming every four weeks because her schedule is tight, and she has had a repair at each of the last three visits. The technician looks at the set and sees that the apex has moved close to the tip on every nail, and the new growth at the base is unsupported. She explains the lever in simple terms: the part of the nail that used to take the knock is now near the end, and the base has nothing over it. She offers two options: a fill at three weeks with a slightly shorter length, or a removal and a rebuild if Megha wants to keep the length. Megha chooses the three week fill. At that appointment the technician rebuilds the apex and shortens the free edge, and the set feels balanced again. The next repair does not happen. Megha moves her standing appointment to three weeks, and the technician notes the change on the card so the booking desk does not offer a four week slot. She also moves the standing booking to three weeks, and the desk confirms it by message.

CAUTION

An overgrown set is not a saving; it is a lever with a break at the end.

Oil daily and gloves for wet work

Cuticle oil is the cheapest tool in the salon and the one most often skipped. Dry cuticle skin cracks, and a crack at the side wall is an opening. Oil keeps the skin flexible, reduces hangnails, and makes the cuticle line easier to push at the next visit. Ask the client to use it once a day, and twice a day if the hands are dry or the season is cold. The technique matters: one drop on each nail, massage it into the cuticle and the side walls, and wipe the excess rather than leaving the hands greasy. Oil after washing hands, not before, because water removes it.

Wet work is the other half of the routine. Washing dishes, cleaning, gardening, and handling wet laundry all soften the nail plate and the skin, and a soft plate flexes under product. Rubber gloves protect both. Recommend a pair for dishes and cleaning, and a separate pair for gardening or chemicals. Gloves should fit, because a loose glove lets water in at the wrist, and they should be dried inside out after use. For clients who work in water all day, for example a cook or a cleaner, gloves are not optional; they are the difference between a set that lasts two weeks and one that lifts in five days.

The calendar should include the seasons. Winter air is dry, and hands that were fine in summer may crack in December. Summer brings sun cream, chlorine, and salt water, all of which affect the finish. A client who swims regularly should book a shorter interval and keep the nails short. A client who gardens should wear gloves and check the side walls for dirt and small nicks. Ask about the season and the routine at each visit, and adjust the aftercare rather than repeating the same advice all year. The advice that fits the client's week is the advice they will follow.

Finally, teach the client what to book instead of what to fix at home. A small chip can be filed smooth at the salon, but a lift needs a removal, not more product on top. A broken nail needs a repair appointment, not glue. A discoloured nail needs a check, not a cover. Put these four situations on a card, in plain words, and tell the client to message the shop rather than improvise. The goal is not to make the client dependent on the salon; it is to make the decisions clear, so the client knows when a five minute visit is enough and when the nail needs to be seen properly.

- 1. Recommend cuticle oil once a day, and twice a day when the hands are dry.
- 2. Show the technique: one drop per nail, massage the cuticle and side walls.
- 3. Recommend oil after washing hands, not before.
- 4. Advise gloves for dishes, cleaning, gardening, and chemicals.
- 5. Check that gloves fit, and dry them inside out after use.
- 6. Adjust the interval for swimming, gardening, and cold weather.
- 7. Tell the client to book a removal for a lift, not to fill or glue it.
- 8. Give the four situations in writing: chip, lift, break, discolouration.

Salon example

A client named Farah runs a small catering business and spends six hours a day with her hands in water. Her gel sets have been lifting at the side walls within a week, and she has started to think that gel does not suit her. The technician asks about her day and learns that she washes pots without gloves and uses a strong cleaning product on the counters. She explains that water softens the plate and that the cleaning product dries the skin, and that the two together make the side wall lift. She recommends a pair of fitted rubber gloves for the sink and a separate pair for cleaning, and a cuticle oil twice a day. She also shortens the length slightly and books a two week check. Farah buys the gloves the same day and messages two weeks later to say the set is still on. At the check, the side walls are intact, and the technician notes the routine on the card so the next appointment starts with the same advice. The technician also asks about the gloves at the next two visits, because a new habit needs a reminder.

CAUTION

Long wet work without gloves will defeat the best application.

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Refuse and refer



Green stain under a lift

A green or blue-green stain under a lifted product is one of the clearest stop signs in the salon. The colour sits between the product and the plate, usually near a side wall or the cuticle, and it does not scrub off because it is not on the surface. It comes from bacteria that grow in the damp pocket created by the lift. The pocket is warm, protected, and wet, which is exactly what those bacteria need. The stain is not dirt and it is not a stain from polish. Covering it with a new set keeps the pocket damp and gives the bacteria more time.

The first step is to get the product off. File it thin, soak the remaining layer with the correct remover, and lift it only when it is soft. Do not pry, and do not drill into the gap to clean it. Once the product is gone, clean the plate with a soft brush and the appropriate cleanser, dry it, and look at the colour and the surface. A small stain on a firm plate with no pain and no spreading redness may settle once it is exposed to air and kept dry. A stain that is spreading, accompanied by pain, swelling, or a crumbly plate, needs a doctor. Either way, the nail stays bare today.

The client will often ask for a cover because of a wedding, a holiday, or a photograph. The answer is no, and the reason should be physical rather than moral. Say that the colour is coming from bacteria in a damp pocket under the product, that a new set would seal the pocket again, and that the nail needs air and time. Offer alternatives: do the other nine nails, shorten the set, choose a plain polish on the healthy nails, or book the affected nail for a later date. Do not offer a clear gel over the stain as a compromise. Clear product still seals, and the stain will still be there underneath.

Record what you saw, what you removed, and what you advised. Note whether the client accepted the referral or asked for a cover, and note the review date. If the client goes to another salon and returns with a covered stain, do not remove the new product in anger; explain again, offer a removal, and refer if the area looks worse. The salon's job is to be consistent, not to win the argument. A client who hears the same clear explanation from two appointments is more likely to follow it than one who is scolded once and then sold a cover.

- 1. Inspect under and around every lifted edge before starting a fill.
- 2. Remove the lifted product by filing thin and soaking, never by prying.
- 3. Clean the plate gently, dry it, and look at the colour and surface.
- 4. Do not cover a green stain with gel, acrylic, polish, or a clear coat.
- 5. Refer if the stain is spreading, painful, or the plate is crumbly.

- 6. Offer the other nine nails, a shorter set, or a later date.
- 7. Record the observation, the removal, and the advice given.
- 8. Review in a week or two, and check the plate before any new set.

Salon example

A client named Naina arrives with a set of gel extensions and a green patch under the middle fingernail. She is getting married in five days and asks the technician to fill the set and cover the patch with a dark colour. The technician removes the product on that nail, soaks the last layer, and cleans the plate. The stain is small, the plate is firm, and there is no swelling or pain. She explains that the green is from bacteria in the damp pocket under the lift, that covering it would seal the moisture back in, and that she will not do it. She offers to do the other nine nails, shorten the extension on the affected finger, and book a review two days before the wedding. Naina is upset and says another salon will cover it. The technician says that may be true, but that she cannot, and explains what to do if the finger becomes sore. Naina agrees to the nine nails and the review. At the review the stain has faded, the plate is dry, and the nail is left bare under a short, clear strengthener that does not seal the edge. The wedding photographs show nine long nails and one short one, and Naina later says nobody noticed.

CAUTION

Never cover a green stain with product, however small it looks.

Thick yellow crumbly nail

A nail that is thick, yellow or brown, crumbly at the edge, and separated from the bed is not a candidate for polish or an enhancement. The surface is uneven, the plate is not stable, and there is often debris packed under the free edge. Product needs a sound surface to bond to, and a crumbly plate cannot provide one. More importantly, a cover hides the change. If the nail is being treated by a doctor, the treatment needs to be visible and the nail needs to be assessed as it responds. If it is not being treated, a cover delays the appointment that would start the process. Either way, the salon's job is to refer, not to disguise.

The temptation is understandable. The client may be embarrassed, and a coat of polish would make the nail look normal for a few weeks. But a thick nail does not hold polish well, and the polish will lift from the uneven surface, taking a layer of crumbling plate with it. An enhancement is worse: the product traps moisture against a plate that is already compromised, and the edge lifts quickly. In a worst case, the cover hides a spreading problem until it is much harder to treat. The short-term cosmetic gain is not worth the risk, and the client is paying for a result that will not last.

What can the salon do? It can tidy carefully if the skin is intact and there is no pain: shorten the free edge with a file, clean gently under the edge without digging, push the cuticle, and oil the surrounding skin. It can explain what to expect from a medical assessment, without naming a diagnosis or a treatment. It can offer a plain polish on the healthy nails so the client does not feel unfinished, and it can suggest a colour that is close to the natural nail if they want the affected one to

look less obvious without a sealing cover. Some shops use a temporary stain or a buffing cream on the surface, but only if the plate is firm and the client understands it is cosmetic.

Referral language should be plain and non-alarming. Say that the nail has changed in a way that needs a doctor to look at it, that the salon cannot diagnose it, and that a cover would hide the change. Give a realistic timeframe: toenails grow slowly, and a nail that has changed may take months to improve even with treatment. Do not promise a cure, do not recommend a home remedy, and do not suggest stopping a treatment the client is already on. Write the advice on the card and offer a review. If the client returns with a doctor's note or a treatment plan, follow it in the salon only to the extent it concerns cosmetic work, and keep the nail bare until the plate is sound.

- 1. Look at the whole nail: thickness, colour, surface, and separation.
- 2. Check the skin for pain, redness, swelling, or an open area.
- 3. Do not apply polish, gel, or acrylic to a thick, crumbly nail.
- 4. Tidy only if the skin is intact: shorten, clean gently, push, oil.
- 5. Refer the client to a doctor, and do not name a condition.
- 6. Explain that a cover would hide the change and trap moisture.
- 7. Give a realistic timeline, and do not promise a cure.
- 8. Record the advice, and review only when the plate is sound.

Salon example

A client named Bina comes in for a pedicure and asks for a bright red polish on all ten toes. The technician removes her socks and sees that both big toenails are thick, yellow-brown, and crumbling at the corners, with debris under the free edge. The skin around them is intact and there is no pain. She explains that she can tidy the nails and polish the other eight, but that she will not cover the two big ones. Bina is embarrassed and says she has had them like this for years and that polish makes them look better. The technician says she understands, but that a cover would trap moisture and hide any change, and that a doctor should look at the nails. She shortens the nails carefully with a file, cleans under the edge without digging, pushes the cuticle, and oils the skin. She polishes the other eight toes and leaves the two big ones bare with a light buff. She writes the advice on the card and offers a review in six weeks. Bina comes back with a treatment plan from her doctor and asks the technician to keep the nails bare until the course is finished.

CAUTION

A thick, crumbly, yellow nail is a referral, not a polish job.

Pus and a new dark streak

Pus around a nail is a medical sign, not a cosmetic one. It may come with redness, swelling, heat, and throbbing, and it means the tissue is inflamed and possibly infected. The salon does not squeeze it, does not drain it, does not apply a hot compress and call it a treatment, and does not cover it with

product. A pointed tool or a squeeze can push bacteria deeper into the finger, and a cover can seal the area and make it worse. Clean the surface gently if the client asks, keep the area dry, and send them to a doctor, the same day if the redness is spreading or the client has diabetes or a weakened immune system.

A new dark streak under the nail is a different kind of warning. A streak that runs from the cuticle toward the tip, especially one that is widening, has appeared recently, or is darker at the base, needs a doctor's check. It can be harmless, and it can be something serious; the salon cannot tell the difference, and it should not try. The rule is simple: a new dark streak is not covered, not buffed, and not explained away. If the client says it has been there for years and has not changed, it still deserves a check if it is new to you or if anything about it has changed. Do not decide that it is harmless because the client is not worried.

The conversation needs to be direct and calm. Say what you see, say that a doctor should look at it, and say that you will not cover it because a cover would hide any change. Give the client a sentence they can use at the clinic: I have a new dark line under my nail that seems to be getting wider. Do not use the word cancer, and do not say it is nothing. Do not hand them a printout from the internet. Offer to do the other nails, and leave the affected one bare. If the client insists on a cover for an event, refuse and offer a short, plain finish on the other nails. The refusal is the service.

Record both kinds of finding carefully. For pus, note the redness, the swelling, the pain, and whether the client has diabetes or another condition you know about. For a dark streak, note where it starts, how wide it is, how long it has been there, and whether it has changed. Write the advice and the client's response. If the client refuses the referral, write that down and still do not cover the nail. The note is not a diagnosis and it is not a legal document; it is a record that the salon saw something, said something, and did not hide it.

- 1. Look at the skin folds for redness, swelling, heat, and pus.
- 2. Do not squeeze, drain, pierce, or cover an area with pus.
- 3. Keep the area clean and dry, and refer the same day if it is spreading.
- 4. Look at every nail for a new dark streak, and compare both hands.
- 5. Do not buff, cover, or explain away a new or widening dark streak.
- 6. Give the client a plain sentence to use at the clinic.
- 7. Record the finding, the advice, and the client's response.
- 8. Refuse a cover for an event, and offer the other nails instead.

Salon example

A client named Arjun comes for a manicure with a painful index finger. The skin at the side of the nail is red, swollen, and shiny, and there is a small amount of pus at the edge. He asks the technician to squeeze it out and cover it with gel so he can work. The technician does not touch the pus. She explains that squeezing could push the infection deeper, that covering it would seal the area, and that he needs a doctor today. She cleans the surface gently with soap and water, dries it, and puts a loose dressing on it so it does not rub. She does the other nine nails, leaves the index bare, and writes the observation and the advice on the card. Arjun is annoyed because he has a client meeting, but he goes to a clinic that afternoon and is given treatment. He returns a week later with the swelling down. At that visit, the technician notices a new dark streak on the same hand, on a different nail, and refers that too. Arjun laughs and says the salon is more careful than his doctor, but he books the follow-up.

CAUTION

Pus is a medical problem; the salon does not drain or cover it.

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Aftercare



Oil and daily care

Aftercare begins before the client leaves the chair. Show them the oil, put a drop on one nail, and massage it in so they can feel how little is needed. Explain that the oil goes on the cuticle and the side walls, not on the product, and that it should be used once a day and twice a day if the hands are dry. Oil after washing hands, because water strips the surface, and before bed, because the hands are still for the night. A bottle that lives in a handbag or beside the kitchen sink gets used; a bottle in a drawer does not. Ask where they will keep it, and make the plan specific.

Daily care is mostly about small habits. Open cans with a spoon, not a nail. Peel labels with a tool, not a thumbnail. Type with the pads of the fingers, not the tips. Wear gloves for washing up and cleaning. File a snag with a fine file rather than pulling it, because pulling a snag takes a strip of plate with it. Keep a file in the bag for exactly that reason. These habits matter more than any product, because most breaks start with a small force applied in the wrong direction. A client who changes one habit usually keeps the next set longer.

Dry hands need more than oil. A hand cream with a barrier ingredient helps in winter, and a humidifier in the bedroom helps more than most clients expect. Ask about the work: a nurse who washes her hands forty times a day needs a different routine from a client who works at a desk. A client who uses hand sanitiser constantly may find that the product at the side walls dries and lifts, and a little oil before the sanitiser helps. The advice should fit the week the client actually has, not an ideal week that does not exist. One changed habit is worth more than a shelf of products the client will never open.

Give the client a weekly check they can do themselves. Look at the cuticle line for a gap, at the side walls for a lift, and at the free edge for a chip. If something catches, file it smooth or book a repair; if something lifts, book a removal; if the colour under the product changes, book a check. Put this on a small card with the shop's number, and say that a question by message is cheaper than a repair. The goal is not to make the client anxious but to make them literate about their own nails, so they arrive with information instead of a problem that has been growing for a week.

- 1. Show the oil and apply one drop in front of the client.
- 2. Explain once a day, twice if dry, after washing and before bed.
- 3. Keep the oil where it will be used, and ask where that is.
- 4. Advise a fine file for snags, and never pull a snag.
- 5. Replace nail-as-tool habits with a spoon, a tool, or a pad of the finger.

- 6. Match the hand cream and the routine to the client's work.
- 7. Give a weekly check: cuticle line, side walls, free edge, colour.
- 8. Write the shop number on the card and invite a message before a repair.

Salon example

A client named Deepa has a gel set and dry hands from working in a hospital, where she washes them constantly. The technician finishes the set, applies a drop of oil to each nail, and asks where Deepa keeps her handbag. She puts a small oil bottle in the bag and a second one in the staff locker, and explains that the oil goes on the cuticle and side walls after washing, not on the gel. She also suggests a hand cream with a barrier ingredient for the winter and a fine file for snags, and shows Deepa how to file a small chip smooth instead of picking it. Deepa mentions that she uses hand sanitiser many times a day. The technician suggests oil before the sanitiser, and a pair of gloves for cleaning at home. Two weeks later Deepa messages a photo of a small lift at one side wall and asks whether she can wait until the next appointment. The technician asks her to come in for a ten minute removal on that nail, and the rest of the set lasts the full three weeks. Deepa says the message saved her a repair.

CAUTION

Oil is not a luxury add-on; dry cuticles lead to lift and hangnails.

Gloves for wet work

Water is the quiet enemy of a fresh set. The nail plate absorbs water and swells, then shrinks as it dries, and that movement stresses the bond at the edges. A client who spends an hour with her hands in the sink every evening is asking the product to survive a daily test. Gloves reduce the exposure, and they also protect the skin from detergents that strip oil. The advice is not to avoid water entirely, which is impossible, but to put a barrier between the hands and the long wet tasks. Dishes, cleaning, laundry, and gardening are the four that matter most.

The glove has to fit. A loose glove lets water in at the wrist and holds it against the skin, which is worse than no glove. A glove that is too tight tears at the thumb and leaves the hand damp. Nitrile gloves suit clients with a latex allergy and resist many cleaning products better than thin vinyl. Keep a box at the station and offer a pair to a client who mentions dishes or cleaning. For gardening, a thicker glove with a grip is better than a disposable one. For chemicals, read the product label and choose a glove the manufacturer recommends, because not every glove resists every solvent.

There is a limit to what gloves can do. A client who works in water all day, such as a cleaner, a cook, or a lifeguard, will still see more lifting than a desk worker, and the interval should be shorter. A client who swims several times a week should keep the nails short and expect a two week cycle. A client who uses a hot tub or spends long hours in a bath should dry the hands afterward and oil them. The aftercare plan should name the exposure and the response, not pretend that gloves solve everything. A realistic plan keeps the client coming back; an unrealistic one makes them feel that the failure is theirs.

Explain the reason in one sentence, because clients follow advice they understand. Say that water swells the nail and that the swelling loosens the seal at the edge, and that gloves keep the nail dry during the long jobs. Then give a practical instruction: keep a pair by the sink, dry the hands afterward, and oil before bed. For a client with a physical job, add a spare pair in the bag. For a client with sensitive skin, suggest a cotton liner under rubber gloves. The advice should take less than a minute to give and less than a minute to follow, or it will not survive the first busy week.

- 1. Ask about dishes, cleaning, laundry, gardening, and swimming.
- 2. Recommend fitted gloves for every long wet task.
- 3. Check the fit at the wrist, and make sure water cannot run in.
- 4. Suggest nitrile for a latex allergy, and thicker gloves for gardening.
- 5. Dry the hands and oil them after any long exposure to water.
- 6. Shorten the interval for clients who work in water all day.
- 7. Give one sentence of reason and one practical instruction.
- 8. Keep a spare pair in the bag for clients with a physical job.

Salon example

A client named Kiran runs a small laundry service from home and wears gel polish to keep her nails neat for customers. Her sets lift at the side walls after about eight days, and she has started to book repairs between appointments. The technician asks about her day and learns that she sorts and folds wet laundry for several hours without gloves. She explains that the plate absorbs water, swells, and loosens the seal, and that the wet fabric keeps the hands damp for hours. She recommends fitted nitrile gloves for the wet work, a spare pair in the pocket, and a hand cream after the shift. She also shortens the set slightly and books a two week check instead of three. Kiran buys the gloves that afternoon. At the check the side walls are intact, and the only wear is a small smooth spot at one tip. The technician writes the routine on the card and asks about the gloves at every visit, because the habit is new and easy to drop when the shop is busy. The card note says gloves and a two week check, and the next set lasts the whole interval.

CAUTION

Long wet work without gloves will defeat the best application.

Book removal and maintenance

The last thing a client should hear before they leave is the removal date. Not a vague suggestion to come back when they need it, but a date written on the card and, if the shop uses messages, a reminder a few days before. Gel polish is usually a two to three week product, and enhancements need a fill at two to three weeks. A client who leaves without a date will come back when something breaks, and by then the visit is a repair rather than maintenance. Booking the removal at the end of the service is the single most effective aftercare instruction, because it turns advice into an appointment.

Tell the client what to do if something goes wrong before the date. A small chip can be filed smooth or covered with a repair if it is not near the cuticle. A lift needs a removal, not a fill. A break needs a repair appointment, and the broken piece should be kept if it can be, because it makes the repair easier. A green stain or a change in colour needs a removal and a check, not a cover. A painful finger needs a doctor, not a manicure. Put these four situations in plain words and make sure the client knows they can message the shop rather than improvise at home.

The maintenance conversation should include the rest. After several sets, suggest a week or two without product, with oil and a strengthener. Some clients will take it; some will not. The suggestion should be made before the plate looks thin, and it should be framed as part of the plan rather than as a punishment. If a client has had a long run of enhancements, a rest is often the difference between a nail that recovers and a nail that keeps lifting. Write the date of the last rest on the card so the recommendation is based on history, not on a general rule.

End the service with a short review. Show the client both hands, check the shape and the cuticle line together, and ask whether anything feels tight or sharp. Fix anything that does before they leave, because a small sharp point becomes a picked edge and a picked edge becomes a lift. Say the removal date, repeat the one aftercare instruction that matters most for this client, and hand them the card. The client should leave knowing what they have, when to come back, and what to do if something changes. That knowledge is the real aftercare, and it is what keeps a client for years rather than for one set.

- 1. Say the removal date before the client leaves, and write it on the card.
- 2. Book the removal or the fill at the desk, not on a vague promise.
- 3. Explain the chip, lift, break, and discolouration rules in plain words.
- 4. Tell the client to message the shop rather than improvise at home.
- 5. Suggest a rest after a long run of enhancements, before the plate looks thin.
- 6. Show both hands and check the shape and cuticle line together.
- 7. Fix anything sharp or tight before the client leaves.
- 8. Repeat the one aftercare instruction that matters most for this client.

Salon example

A client named Sonal has been wearing gel polish for eight months without a break. The technician finishes the set, shows her both hands, and asks whether anything feels tight. Sonal mentions a sharp corner on one thumb, which the technician files smooth. Then she says the removal is due in two and a half weeks and writes the date on the card. She also suggests a two week rest after that removal, with oil and a strengthener, because the plate at the tips looks slightly white. Sonal says she has a wedding in the rest period and does not want bare nails. The technician offers a compromise: a short, plain polish that can be removed gently, and a gel set after the wedding. Sonal agrees, and the removal is booked for the week before the wedding, with the rest moved to the two weeks after. At the removal, the technician checks the plates and finds them sound. She oils them, gives Sonal the strengthener, and books the new set for three weeks later. The plan is on the card, and both appointments are kept.

CAUTION

An overgrown set is not a saving; it is a lift waiting to happen.

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Glossary

Apex

The highest point of an enhancement, built over the stress area to spread impact.

Builder gel

A thicker gel used for structure, short extensions, and overlays; cured under a lamp.

Cuticle

The thin layer of dead skin on the plate at the base of the nail; pushed, never cut.

Cuticle gap

The small margin left between the product and the cuticle so growth does not lift the seal.

Eponychium

The living skin fold at the base of the nail that seals the space above the matrix.

Free edge

The part of the nail plate that extends beyond the fingertip.

Hard gel

A gel used for structure that does not soak off easily and is usually filed thin for removal.

Hyponychium

The seal of skin under the free edge that keeps dirt and moisture out.

Inhibition layer

The tacky layer left on some gels after curing, which is wiped before the next coat.

Lift

A separation between the enhancement and the natural nail, visible as a shadow or movement.

Liquid and powder

An enhancement system in which a monomer liquid is mixed with a polymer powder and sets without a lamp.

Lunula

The pale half-moon at the base of the nail, the visible part of the matrix.

Matrix

The area at the base of the nail where new plate is produced.

Methacrylate

A family of chemicals in gel and acrylic that can cause allergy after repeated skin contact.

Nail bed

The skin under the nail plate, running from the matrix to the hyponychium.

Nail plate

The hard, visible nail itself, made mostly of keratin.

Onycholysis

Separation of the nail plate from the nail bed, which can follow trauma or infection.

Paronychia

Inflammation or infection of the skin around the nail, often with redness and swelling.

Pseudomonas

Bacteria that can grow under a lift and leave a green or blue-green stain.

Side wall

The side edge of the nail where the plate meets the skin.

Soak-off

Removal of gel by softening it with acetone rather than prying or drilling.

Squoval

A shape with a straight free edge and rounded corners.

Stress area

The zone where the nail bends most, roughly the middle, slightly toward the free edge.

Subungual hematoma

A collection of blood under the nail plate, usually after a knock.

Tuberculocidal

A disinfectant claim that the product kills tuberculosis bacteria at the stated contact time.

Under-cure

A gel layer that has not received enough light energy and stays soft inside.

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