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April 12, 2002



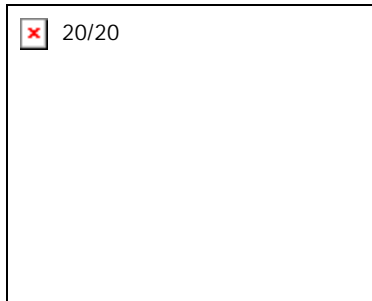
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## Nail Salon Dangers

### 20/20 Finds Salons Still Using Dangerous Adhesive



April 12 — Carol Webb's nails were her pride and joy: long, strong and beautiful.

State health inspectors believe some nail salons are still using a substance the FDA has called "poisonous and deleterious." (ABCNEWS.com)

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"That was my jewel. I mean, I loved my nails," she says.

But then, like millions of other women, she decided to try an artificial alternative that promised nails that could be longer, stronger and more hard-wearing than natural nails: acrylic nails.

She visited a salon in Roanoke, Va., that was offering a full set of acrylic nails at a discount price.

Within two days, she says, she started feeling pain and pressure under her fingernails, along with some numbness. She had the acrylics removed, but then, to her horror, watched as her own nails started to turn black and come off in layers.

Webb was one of many women who had an adverse reaction to an adhesive that many nail salons use as a cheap alternative to safer nail treatments, despite a decades-old warning from the Food and Drug Administration that it is "a poisonous and deleterious substance that should not be used in fingernail preparations."

The substance, methyl methacrylate, known as MMA, makes an inexpensive adhesive that bonds very strongly and dries quickly. However, in some women it can cause adverse skin reactions wherever the nails touch, and damage or destroy nailbeds, sometimes permanently. The substance can cause nerve damage and exacerbate allergies in some women, according to Dr. Shelley Sekula Rodriguez, a Texas dermatologist who is a consultant for ABCNEWS.

The FDA first issued its warning about MMA in 1974, and most salons and manufacturers switched to adhesives containing ethyl methacrylate, or EMA, a substance that is safer than MMA but costs several times as much.

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Today, six years later, Webb's nails are still short stumps that doctors say will never grow back. Ashamed to show her nails in public, she regrets the day she decided to try the salon's offer. "When you go cheap, that's what you get," she says. "And I shouldn't have done that."

Webb is now suing the salon. The salon's owners deny any responsibility.

### 20/20 Investigates

To see whether salons are still using MMA, *20/20* investigated eight salons in Dallas, taking samples of the liquid they were using to make acrylic nails and paying to have them analyzed.

The results were alarming: The samples from all eight of the Dallas salons contained extremely high levels of MMA. In a similar test last year, *20/20* found that 14 out of 26 salons in Phoenix, Boston, Houston and Dallas were using MMA.

When confronted with the results, most of the Dallas salon owners claimed never to have heard of MMA. Inspectors from the Texas Cosmetology Commission, which regulates nail salons in the state, say that is unlikely, since manicurists are taught about MMA in the courses required to get a license.

Some of the salon owners blamed their suppliers, saying they did not know what was in the adhesive they were buying. But *20/20* tested a bottle of the adhesive from the supplier used by most of the Dallas salons, and found no trace of MMA.

Health officials believe that many nail salons buy the inexpensive MMA on the black market and transfer it to bottles purporting to contain the more expensive, safe adhesive.

### Watch Out for the Sharp Smell

Not everyone who is exposed to MMA has an adverse reaction, and some manufacturers say the chemical is no more dangerous than other nail products. But the Nail Manufacturers Council, an industry group, supports the FDA warning and advises salons to use EMA-based products instead.

Although 30 states have banned the use of MMA in nail salons, state inspectors say enforcement is generally lax, in part because of the high cost of testing for MMA.

However, there are warning signs that can help women avoid the potentially dangerous substance.

If a salon is offering very inexpensive acrylic nail treatments, for less than \$20 a set, that might be a sign that they are using the less expensive MMA. Another sign is the substance's pungent, bitter chemical smell, which can be strong enough to make one's eyes water.

MMA adhesive is so powerful that it makes acrylic nails extremely hard to remove once they have been applied. "If it takes a half an hour of soaking in really strong remover to pull those old acrylics off, she should have a high suspicion they're using MMA," says Rodriguez.

### Reasons Why MMA Should Not Be Used in Salons

- **MMA is too hard.** The natural nail under MMA products can be damaged or even torn off by even a slight bump to the finger.
- **Nail Damage.** In order to make MMA stick, some technicians roughen the natural nail too much.
- **FDA Warning.** The FDA says MMA is "a poisonous and deleterious substance" and should not be used in artificial nail products.

### Signs of a Safe Salon

When choosing a salon, consumers should look for:

- **Licenses.** Both the salon and each operator should have a license with a photo.
- **Cleanliness.**
- **Disinfection procedures.**
- **Labeled containers.** Make sure that operators are using substances that come from manufacturers' labeled containers. This is not a guarantee of safety, however, since inspectors believe some salons may pour MMA-based substances into bottles.
- **Small brushes.** Artificial nail enhancement products should not come in contact with skin during application. A brush larger than your finger makes this difficult, if not impossible. Operators using MMA often use a very large brush.

#### Warning Signs for Consumers

- **No licenses visibly posted.**
- **Low prices.** Low prices can be an indicator that inexpensive MMA-based products are being used.
- **Strong odor.** MMA has a pungent chemical odor that can cause dizziness or lightheadedness. (Masks, however, are not necessarily an indicator of MMA use.)
- **Dirty or unsanitary conditions.**
- **Large brushes.** Brushes larger than your finger make it likely that the substances being used might come into contact with your skin. Operators using MMA often use a very large brush.

#### Consumer Safety Note:

Due to the coarseness of MMA, operators often use an electric file to finish the nail. Electric files can be safe if properly used and their metal bits are cleaned and disinfected after each use. Sanding sleeves are single-use items and must be thrown away after each use. **DO NOT ALLOW A TECHNICIAN TO USE DIRTY OR PREVIOUSLY USED FILES OR BITS FOR ELECTRIC FILES ON YOUR NAILS!** Make the technician use clean implements and files on each time you visit the salon.

#### Alternatives to Acrylic Nails

Acrylic nails can, and should be, safe when properly applied and maintained. But there are alternatives for women who want to be absolutely sure of avoiding potentially dangerous MMA-based products:

- **Light-cured gels.** Light-cured gel products are applied with a small brush, then placed under an ultraviolet light in order for the product to harden. The gels are the consistency of honey, and either clear or colored. There is no combining of products, so if a salon uses a mixture of liquid and powder, this is not a gel. Gels can be applied over the natural nail, over tips, or extended with a form.
- **Wraps.** Wrap products include silk, linen and fiberglass. Mesh is applied over the nail or tip, then a resin is brushed over the entire nail. An activator is sometimes used to speed up the set of the resin.
- **Natural-nail manicures.** Natural-nail cultivation products and procedures have become quite advanced. Various types of manicures can help develop stronger, healthier nails. ■

*Compiled for ABCNEWS by Nancy King, a licensed nail technician and independent industry consultant who has served as an expert witness in lawsuits against salons accused of using MMA-based products.*

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