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The MMA Controversy

Reprinted by Permission, [NAILS Magazine](#)
September 1997 Page 103
By Suzette Hill

**The nail industry is beginning to understand
the dangers of methyl methacrylate. But
more nail technicians need to take action.**

At a recent tradeshow, attendees were invited to try a new acrylic system by an exhibitor. "It's great!" they were told. "It stays on the nails; your clients can go weeks without lifting.

At least one nail technician (who asked not to be named) tried it and agreed. "It was one of the best products I've ever seen. The nails were beautiful, and they stayed on great," she says.

They stayed on so great, in fact, that even when one of her clients jammed a nail, the product held fast, causing the natural nail to tear across the nail bed. "I couldn't get the product off. I tried soaking it off, and it didn't even get gummy. That's when I realized the product must be methyl methacrylate. I finally got it off with a really coarse file. The nail was a bloody mess," she says.

"I can't believe no one is doing anything about it," she complains of methyl methacrylate (MMA).

Her complaint is echoed by nail technicians across the country who are frustrated by the use of MMA monomer. And for a long time, no one did do anything about the use of MMA in nail salons, mostly because not very many nail technicians were using it, and they were obtaining it on the "gray market" -through dental suppliers or the back doors of unscrupulous suppliers.

Not anymore: Today, MMA can be found next to ethyl methacrylate on the shelves of some beauty suppliers, and it's been seen (although not labeled as such) at a few major beauty shows. Sue Sansom, executive director of the Arizona State Board, even suspects people have used it in the state board exam. "Our examiners have complained of a very strong smell and of headaches and dizziness," she says. "While acrylic liquids all have an odor, the odor they've complained of is very distinct."

Although no one has statistics on how many nail technicians are using MMA and how many clients have been injured by it, there's no question it's out there and causing problems. It does remain to be answered if the industry can get it out of salons and off clients' nail.

It's Back, Big Time

In 1972, MMA gained notoriety when the Food and Drug Administration

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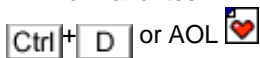
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(FDA) deemed it a "poisonous and deleterious" ingredient when used in liquid monomer and got a court-ordered injunction prohibiting a particular nail product manufacturer from selling MMA monomer. While the injunction didn't stop manufacturers from distributing it in the nail industry, the FDA then seized MMA products from several manufacturers and asked others to recall it. While the FDA's actions didn't drive MMA out of the industry, it sent it underground.

MMA remained underground until the Asian salon segment - the predominant user of MMA - experienced explosive growth, and along with it the use of MMA. "It has become a major product in our industry again," asserts Doug Schoon, chemist and director of R&D for Creative Nail Design (Vista, Calif.).

Even state boards, who maintain painful neutrality on ethnicity, say MMA is mostly found in Asian salons. "We've found that the Vietnamese salons are mostly the ones that use it," says Larry Perkins, director of enforcement for the Texas State Board.

MMA is popular in the Asian community because it sets up fast and adheres like no other product can (or should). Above all, it's popular for its price - about \$15 a gallon versus about \$215 a gallon for a name-brand ethyl methacrylate monomer.

"I think that most of the people using it don't know it can injure them or their clients," says Schoon. Tony Cuccio, president of Star Nail Products (Valencia, Calif.) agrees: "An Asian distributor told me Asian technicians think it's a ploy by the white establishment to get more money for products. They don't think it's really a health hazard."

"Lots of manufacturers make methyl methacrylate for the Asian salons because it works faster and it works better;" explains Peter Ha, owner of East West Beauty Supply (Fall's Church, Va.). "Not too many of them know of the problems because the suppliers don't tell them because they don't want to lose business."

MMA can cause serious skin reactions and permanent nail damage, including actual nail loss. On the nail technician's part, long-term exposure also can cause permanent damage to the respiratory system and the liver. Serious health concerns aside, MMA nails bond so well to the natural nail and are so rigid that instead of snapping harmlessly off the natural nail when jammed or caught, they hold tight, causing painful breaks and tears off the natural nail.

"Until the FDA acts to eliminate MMA at the manufacture and distributor levels, it's up to state boards to stop salons from using it."

Nail technicians using the product risk increased liability for injury to their clients. MMA monomer is so inexpensive, say Schoon and Larry Gaynor, president of Nailco Salon Marketplace (Farmington Hills, Mich.), because it's not backed by research and development, education, advertising and marketing, and product liability insurance. "The risk of using MMA exceeds the value," Gaynor adds.

FDA Says No Again

Complaints of severe allergic reactions and permanent nail loss are what originally spurred the FDA to act against nail product manufacturers in 1972, but the FDA remained silent about MMA for the next 24 years. It wasn't until repeated inquiries from the Nail Manufacturers Council (NMC) last year that the FDA restated its position.

In a letter to Jim Nordstrom, president of the NMC, dated September 20, 1996, Allen Halper, assistant to the director, division of programs and enforcement policy, office of Cosmetics and Colors for the FDA, wrote:

"We continue to believe that liquid methyl methacrylate, when used in cosmetic fingernail preparations, is a poisonous and deleterious substance. Generally speaking, the agency is prepared to consider regulatory action against fingernail products formulated with liquid methyl methacrylate monomer as one of its ingredients."

While the FDA took a manufacturer to court and got an injunction to prevent that manufacturer from distributing MMA to the nail industry, the FDA never proposed regulations prohibiting its use as an ingredient in nail monomers. To prevent its use, the FDA would either have to sue manufacturers distributing it to get injunctions stopping them from distributing it (based on their studies showing it to be "poisonous and deleterious" in nail monomer), or the FDA would have to pass regulations prohibiting its use in nail monomer.

"We can take action against MMA because it's a poisonous, adulterated ingredient," Halper explains. "We take legal action by seizing a product or by promulgating regulations on a specific ingredient. [Promulgating regulations] takes much longer to do, and in view of the limited use of MMA, I don't think any [justification] was given for going the regulatory route in the early '70s. The seizures of MMA spelled out the agency's position." He adds that the agency's position is still clear and that the agency doesn't see a need for creating regulations banning its use.

Additionally, while in his letter Halper states the FDA is prepared to take action against marketers and distributors, he recently told NAILS that the FDA is deferring action on MMA use in salons to state and local agencies. "The calls I'm getting are about the product being used by retail establishments, which makes regulating its use difficult because MMA is not prohibited," Halper says. "The state agencies could go in and say, 'stop.' For us, it's much more complex to go through the courts."

And while he says the FDA is willing to take action against companies distributing MMA to the nail industry, Halper says he doesn't have any concrete information to act on. "Everyone says it's out there, but the reports we receive are sporadic, and when we ask for specific information about actual firms and people's names, we don't end up with anything," Halper says. "If the industry has information and is willing to share it, that would be a first step toward action. But at this point, I don't know that there is a next step."

Still, Halper says, "From time to time our district offices follow up on various complaints we've received." One of those times may be now: A nail division manager for a distributor in the northeast told NAILS she has been providing information and documentation to the FDA's local office as part of its investigation into a company distributing MMA to the nail industry. An FDA investigator would neither confirm nor deny the distributor's claim.

Whether or not the FDA is currently investigating the distribution of MMA, many speculate it's only a matter of time before it does. "The FDA is taking notice and will eventually do something," Schoon says. "When it was a few companies and a few people using MMA they wouldn't bother, but because the use is becoming so widespread, it's just a matter of time before they act."

The State of MMA

Until the FDA acts to eliminate MMA at the manufacturer and distributor levels, it's up to state boards to stop salons from using it. While many state boards currently don't have regulations, some are evaluating the issue in light of recent attention.

"It hasn't surfaced as a major problem at this point," says Debra Norton, executive director of the Arkansas State Board. "We have incorporated some questions into the interview for complaints to determine if an establishment might be using it. We also have notified our inspectors of the potential problem and have asked them to report what they find in salons."

Based on the FDA's letter and its own research, the Ohio State Board passed a new regulation mandating that "all chemicals, and any equipment used in providing any cosmetology service... are subject to the approval of the board to ensure the health and safety of licensees and patrons." Furthermore, the regulation states, "Nail service providers must take steps to ensure that all nail service products do not contain methyl methacrylate as a monomer agent for cosmetic nail applications." The new regulation were outlined in a letter mailed to all

Ohio salons this past summer.

David Williamson, executive director of the Ohio State Board says, "The FDA's position is that it is a poisonous and deleterious substance ... Our board felt that was sufficient enough to respond that it's not a product approved for use."

In Texas, where state board regulations have banned MMA for use on nails since 1974, inspectors have observed a growing use of the chemical in recent years. "Our inspector in the Dallas/Fort Worth area is in the process of taking samples and testing them for MMA," says Larry Perkins, director of enforcement. "Once we get the results back we're going to outlaw those products containing it."

And while the Oregon State Board's regulations don't prohibit its use, it too, is also taking action to remove it from salons. "We had a case we worked on with the FDA on illegal dyes and tints," says Larry Peck, compliance officer for the Oregon State Board. "We investigated with the FDA and then went out into salons, found it, and confiscated it. Then we made up an announcement that we made part of the inspection. If salons were caught using the dyes and tints, we posted a warning in the salon to consumers. We'll probably do the same thing with MMA."

"Today, MMA can be found next to ethyl methacrylate on the shelves of some beauty suppliers, and it's been seen at a few major beauty shows."

Like the Texas State Board, the Oregon State Board plans to identify specific products containing MMA so investigators will know what to look for in salons. In Oregon, however, the tests will be done at the distributor level.

"We'll visit distributors with a field-testing machine, the same kind OSHA uses, looking for products containing MMA. We'll cut it off at that point," Peck says.

Few state boards can afford to go to the lengths Texas and Oregon are going because the tests to identify MMA cost anywhere from \$125 to \$350 per product sample (although at least one nail manufacturer is currently developing a much less expensive test for industry use). And considering that most state board inspectors are already overextended, with some salons going years between inspections, it's unlikely MMA will become a priority for most states unless they are flooded with consumer complaints about its use.

Removing MMA Nails

Nails applied with MMA monomer are easy to identify because they're almost impossible to remove. "That's how you tell they're MMA nails," says Doug Schoon. "You can't soak them off."

The only way to remove MMA nails is to file them down with a 60- or 80-grit file. And even then you're looking at almost an hour to get them off, says Rima Kitsko, owner of Spoiled Rotten Nail Studio in Indianapolis. In fact, after encountering several clients with MMA nails, she set a new policy to not book appointments for new clients who already have artificial nails until they come in for a consultation.

During the consultation, Kitsko inspects the nails and if the acrylic layer is thick she suspects MMA and schedules an extra hour for removal. If she suspects MMA was used, she explains that it's not good for the nails and encourages them to have the nails removed.

Because MMA bonds so well to the natural nail, Schoon recommends against filing off all the product. "People curse the nail technician who put them on, but

the damage comes in taking them off. I recommend filing them down so that just a very thin layer is left and then applying a new nail over it. There's more risk to removing the product entirely than there is in leaving a thin layer on.

"If filed very thin, it's unlikely the nail plate itself will break if the nail is

caught or jammed," he adds.

If you or the client is determined to remove all the product, Schoon recommends filing it down to a very thin layer and then soaking the nail in acetone. "Try soaking for awhile and then scraping the surface with a cuticle stick" he says. "That will help break the bond."

What You Can Do

It's not that state boards are out of touch with the industry regarding MMA it's that they don't hear what's actually going on. Few clients complain to their state board; those who do don't even know about MMA, much less what the problems with it are.

However nail technicians should be (but often aren't) reporting cases of MMA use to their state boards. This doesn't mean filing complaints against all your competition, but it does mean that when a client comes in with nails that can't be removed except with heavy filing (an indicator of MMA), you should find out from the client where the nails were applied and report it to the state board. While you may not see an immediate reaction, if enough nail technicians do this, state boards are more likely to address the issue.

Nail technicians can be even more proactive by educating clients about the use of MMA and warning clients of what to look for Scott Stebbeds, owner of Northwest Nail Source (Portland, Ore.), encourages local nail salons to take action by printing 3,000 red fliers that have MMA in a circle with a slash through it. Below this graphic he placed a strong statement about salons using products not deemed harmful by the FDA. Along with these fliers, which he distributes to his customers, he passes out copies of the NMC's pamphlet and Oregon State Board complaint forms.

"Before, nail technicians didn't know enough about what MMA was and what impact it would have on their business. Now they're reading the literature, putting up the posters, and starting to educate the public," Stebbeds says. "The State Board is getting an influx of complaint forms."

In Massachusetts, Terri Taricco, nail division and inside sales manager of R.G. Shakour (Westboro, Mass.), took a similar approach by creating fliers for salons to post She also ran an article on MMA in the distributor's Nail Nut News newsletter.

The media also is a powerful tool for spreading information, and TV stations in Oregon, Virginia and Massachusetts already have picked up on MMA as a news story While negative news stories can be as harmful to the industry as they are helpful, they can teach consumers how to tell a reputable nail professional from a disreputable one.

How Can You Tell It's MMA?

It's usually not difficult to tell that a product contains MMA. Here are three simple things to watch for:

- Unusually strong or strange odor that doesn't smell like other acrylic liquids.
- Nail extensions that are extremely hard and very difficult to file, even with coarse abrasives.
- Nail extensions that will not soak off in solvents designed to remove acrylics.

Information provided by the Nail Manufacturers Council. For a copy of the NMC's brochure "Update for Nail Technicians - Methyl Methacrylate Monomer," call (312) 245-1595.





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