Avoid Nail Damage With Proper Gel-Polish Removal

By Tim Crowley
Avoid Nail Damage With Proper Gel-Polish Removal

“Gel-polish should come off easily with no heavy-handed or forceful scraping,” says Doug Schoon, president of Schoon Scientific and renowned nail industry chemist. “If you have to force the product off at all, you are doing something wrong.”

Incorrect removal can cause pits, cracks, and scrapes on a client’s nail plate, often appearing as small white spots on the nails. In the interest of speed, many nail technicians are taking shortcuts on gel removal, which in the long run can be not only damaging to a client’s nails, but can be damaging to a nail technician’s business if clients decide to give up on gels because of the damage.

According to OPI chief scientist Paul Bryson, the most common reason why nail plates are injured during a soak-off gel removal is because nail technicians do not let the product soak long enough to fully break the bond to the natural nail.

“Most of the time they’re not letting the nails soak for a long enough time, and when they go to remove the gel they pry or peel it off,” notes Bryson. “When they do this, they take part of the natural nail plate off with the gel.”

This result is a thin layer of the natural nail getting pulled up and causing divots and pockets in the natural nail bed.

What’s worse is that when clients notice the damage and ask their nail technicians about it, many technicians respond by saying that it’s a natural part of the gel process and merely a dehydration of the nail plate from the acetone.

“This is misleading,” says Jim McConnell, president and head chemist of Light Elegance. “Because acetone does remove oils from the nail, but the nail plate itself is not damaged by the acetone. The culprit here is the keratin layer in the nail enduring trauma when the gel-polish is forced and pried off the nail.”

Nail professionals do care about their clients’ nails, but all too many are passing this problem off as being caused by the acetone and that the nails are fine for another application.

But acetone is not the problem causing these weakened nails. “You can soak nails in acetone all day and you won’t see any white spots,” says Schoon. “The whole nail might look dry if you leave it in there for days, but the acetone is not the issue. It’s when nail techs see that these gels are not coming off after 12 minutes and they’re just scraping them off.”

Soak-off gel-polish is designed to soak off quickly and easily. But some nail techs cut the full soak-off time short because they think if they can remove the product quickly, even if resorting to a little force, then the nail is OK for another application and they’ve shaved some time off their total application procedure.

Danielle Candido is the northeast regional manager of education for Hand & Nail Harmony, and she says that nail techs need to heed to the manufacturer’s recommended soak-off times, while still understanding that some clients may require a bit more time for an efficient soak-off procedure.
A Trained Eye

“If your client is wearing her gel-polish for a full 21 days or longer, she might need a little more time to soak to fully get the product off,” Candido says. “It really takes an educated nail tech to know that if she unwraps the fingers and begins to take off the gel-polish and sees it is holding or snagging a little, then she needs to reapply the wraps and let the removal solution or acetone sit on the gel-polish a few minutes more.”

Some gel-polish manufacturers advise that a soft tool like an orangewood stick be used to help gently push off the gel-polish after it has been soaked for an appropriate length of time, but that it should require little to no pressure at all to slough off the nail.

The goal is to keep the natural nail plate firmly intact and healthy for its next application. “If just running the orangewood stick down the nail isn’t enough, then you need to reapply the remover and wraps,” says Candido.

For other gel-polish lines, that do not recommend a removal tool, they advise that removing gel-polish should come as easy as simply twisting off the soak-off wrap with a little pressure from the technician’s fingers. Doug Schoon adds, “If a technician does anything that is harmful to the natural nail, she is not doing her job. These are nail enhancements not replacements.”

Stopping the Problem

Schoon notes that the recent advent of new gel-polish lines poses a unique challenge for nail techs. Traditionally, nail techs would only soak-off the entirety of an enhancement product maybe at most twice a year.

The product is typically left on the nail and as it grows out, the new fresh nail plate at the base of the cuticle is prepped and filled. Now, nail techs are being asked to remove the entirety of the product every two weeks for a color change. And many technicians are unclear and untrained as to how much time the removal product requires them to soak for a proper loosening of the product to the natural nail.

The majority of nail techs though are using gel-polish correctly and to great success, but it only takes a few bad apples for the industry to take notice. “Gel-polish is the best thing that’s happened to the nail industry in a long time,” says Schoon. “And because of improper removal, we’re threatening to poison the well.”

“I don’t think anyone is doing this on purpose,” he adds, saying that whenever he has shown a nail tech the proper process, she always responds positively and says, “I never thought of it that way.”

The first job for nail technicians is to protect the natural nails of their clients. Anytime you scrape the nail you are harming the natural nail. Nail technicians also have an obligation to educate their own clients on how to take care of their nails at home. Too many clients are their own worst enemies when it comes to nail health, pushing their new gel-polish manicures too far among the rigors of everyday life.

“They go out and think they can do anything they want, but if the client starts picking at them she can really end up injuring her nail plate,” says Jim McConnell, who has seen his share of manicure-abusive clients. For the nail technician, she needs to advise her clients that the health of their own nail beds is their responsibility too. When they are away from the salon, they need to watch themselves around chemicals similar to acetone. Simple isopropyl solutions used for everyday cleaning can start to break down gel-polish. And clients should never pick at their nails. This pulls the nail plate keratin just as when a nail tech scrapes and pulls too hard during removal.

For technicians, the answer to this problem literally is right in their hands. And if the industry works together to help one another become better educated, all will benefit. The clients will have happy nails, and will continue to contribute to the growing success of gel-polish and the nail industry as a whole.
1. Use the finger wrapping technique over soaking the nails in a bowl. Acetone does have a dehydrating effect on skin so you want to minimize the contact between the two as much as possible, which the wrapping method does. Plus, it allows you to check one nail and see if it the gel-polish is ready for removal while all the other fingers are still wrapped.

2. Do not apply the gel-polish too thickly. Gel-polish is meant to be a thin color coat similar to a traditional polish lacquer coat. The thicker the gel-polish, the longer you have to soak to properly remove.

3. Be gentle. Remember that the gel-polish should come off very easily, and if you need to use an orangewood stick, it should be used gently to remove the gel-polish without prying or scraping.

4. Apply heat. A hot moist towel can be draped over the fingertips after they have been wrapped. Or you can put the client’s wrapped fingers and hands into plastic gloves, and then soak the plastic gloved hands in warm water. These techniques are reported to cut the soak-off time down by as much as a few minutes.

5. Break the seal of the top coat to help the soak-off solution penetrate all the way down to the nail plate. Note that not all gel-polish manufacturers require this, but taking a light grit file (180-grit) and gently removing the surface shine can help. Jim McConnell explains, “The glossy layer is shiny because it does not have many pores. Removing it helps the soak-off solution penetrate through the gel-polish.”

HELPFUL HINTS

With the biggest problem being inadequate soak-off times and nail damage during subsequent forced gel removal, there are some things you can do to help expedite the soak-off process without compromising effectiveness.
A CLOSER LOOK

Doug Schoon has been instrumental in starting the education campaign on how to properly soak off gel-polish. Through his website schoonscientific.com, he supplies the close-up, microscopic effect that happens when nail plates are damaged by improper removal. Here are four high-resolution and zoomed-in images of the type of damage improper removal does to nail plates.

**Image 1** is magnified over 3,000 times and shows damage caused by “prying” residual UV gel-polish from the nail plate. A large cluster of these can create the appearance of white to off-white spots or patches.

**Images 2 and 3** show that even a wooden pusher when used incorrectly can damage softened nail plates and bunch up nail cells like a throw rug sliding on a slippery floor. Look closely and you’ll see where a wooden pusher created the wide gouges leading up to these damaged areas that range in size from one half to twice the thickness of a human hair and smaller. Imagine the damage a metal pusher and heavy hand could do. The spots are small, but many of them bunched together create the appearance of a diffused white spot in the nail plate. Fortunately, this type of damage is avoidable for most people if these coats are properly removed. UV gel-polish may not always be suited for every nail types, like problematic thin or weak nail plates. As always, nail professionals should use their professional judgment when assessing a client’s suitability for any nail service.

**Image 4** is a nail magnified almost 200 times to show a nail bed surface scattered with islands of UV nail color coatings that were not properly removed. This is often how the damage starts. Overly aggressive scraping with any implement significantly increases the risk of surface damage. Filing away the residual coating with an abrasive can also lead to excessive nail plate thinning. It’s best to follow the manufacturer’s instructions and/or always allow sufficient time to properly soften the gel-polish with remover before attempting to remove it from the nail plate. If the UV coating hasn’t sufficiently softened, continue softening until the coating can be removed without damaging the nail plate. Don’t rush, and always take the necessary time to completely soften the UV coating before gently removing with a cautious approach and careful touch.
The LATEST WRAPS AND REMOVERS

To meet the soak-off needs of all of the gel-polish lines, manufacturers have begun to release their own brands of soak-off solutions and remover wraps to help techs get an effective and thorough soak for clients.

Wrap It Up Remover wraps are specially designed to conform to the tip of the finger and keep the acetone or soak-off solution pressed against the gel-polish to ensure a maximum amount of coverage contact for complete penetration. They take the place of traditional aluminum foil with pre-cut shapes to fit snugly and apply easily over the finger.

SOAKS — Let it soak

Many manufacturers are coming out with their own gel-polish removal liquids that have added hydrating emollients to keep the removal process soft on skin, while still effectively removing all the gel.