

# Subtle Signs on Your Hands Reveal Serious Health Issues

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › From nail color and texture changes signaling anemia, lung conditions or thyroid problems to skin changes indicating eczema or Raynaud's phenomenon, your hands offer valuable insights into your overall health
- › Pay close attention to your nails – pale nails suggest anemia, yellowing could indicate lung or liver issues, and changes in texture like pitting or clubbing point to psoriasis or heart conditions
- › Skin changes on your hands, such as persistent dryness, cracking or unusual rashes, might be linked to eczema, thyroid problems or even circulatory issues like Raynaud's phenomenon
- › Hand pain, swelling and numbness shouldn't be ignored, as they are symptoms of arthritis (rheumatoid or osteoarthritis), carpal tunnel syndrome, lymphedema or even kidney disease
- › Reduced hand grip strength is increasingly recognized as an indicator of weakened immunity, declining muscle mass with age and underlying heart health, warranting attention to overall well-being

Have you ever noticed a sudden change in your hands? Maybe your nails are more brittle than usual, or perhaps you've experienced a strange tingling in your fingers. It's easy to dismiss these changes as minor inconveniences, but sometimes, these subtle signs are early indicators of underlying health issues. Your hands are intricate structures, with a dense network of blood vessels, nerves and skin.

This complexity makes them susceptible to reflecting changes happening elsewhere in your body. By paying close attention to these signals, you gain valuable insights into your overall health. Being aware of these subtle changes allows for earlier diagnosis and treatment, which makes a big difference in preventing more serious health problems down the road.

## **Cracks, Colors and Curves – Decoding Your Nail Health**

Your nails, often an afterthought in your daily routine, provide valuable clues about your health. Healthy nails typically have a pinkish nail bed, thanks to the blood supply underneath, and a whitish half-moon shape at the base called the lunula. The nail itself is smooth and strong. Changes in nail color sometimes signal underlying issues.

One such change is pale nails, which is a sign of anemia, a condition where your body doesn't have enough healthy red blood cells. Think of it like a plant not getting enough water – it becomes pale and weak. Similarly, when your body lacks iron, which is essential for red blood cell production, your nails lose their healthy pink hue. This paleness is caused by a reduced amount of hemoglobin in the red blood cells, which are responsible for carrying oxygen throughout the body.

Yellow nails are another cause for concern. While sometimes caused by nail polish stains or other external factors, yellowing is also be linked to more serious conditions like lung problems, diabetes or fungal infections. Just as prolonged exposure to certain chemicals stain objects yellow, certain internal conditions can affect the nail's appearance.

For example, yellow nail syndrome is a rare condition that affects the nails, causing them to thicken, yellow and grow slowly, and is often associated with respiratory issues.<sup>1</sup> Other color changes to watch for include bluish nails, which indicate cyanosis, a sign of low oxygen levels in the blood.

This is associated with lung or heart problems. White spots on the nails, while often harmless and caused by minor injuries, are occasionally linked to zinc deficiency. If you

notice persistent or unusual color changes in your nails, it's always a good idea to consult a doctor.

Changes in nail texture and shape are also important indicators. Healthy nails are typically smooth and even. However, various conditions alter their appearance. Onycholysis, in which the nail plate separates from the nail bed, is sometimes related to hypothyroidism, a condition where your thyroid gland is underactive.<sup>2</sup>

Another nail change to be aware of is nail pitting, which appears as small depressions or dents in the nail surface. This is often associated with psoriasis, an autoimmune condition that causes rapid skin cell growth.

Finally, clubbing, which involves the enlargement of your fingertips and a downward curving of your nails, is often a sign of underlying lung disease or heart conditions.<sup>3</sup> When your body doesn't get enough oxygen, it affects tissue growth, leading to these changes in the fingertips and nails.

## **Skin Clues on Your Hands That Shouldn't Be Ignored**

The skin on your hands, constantly exposed to the elements, also provides valuable insights into your overall health. While dry skin is a common complaint, especially during colder months or with frequent handwashing, certain skin changes signal more than just dryness. It's important to know when dry skin is normal and when it's a sign of something else.

**Eczema**, also known as atopic dermatitis, is a skin condition characterized by itchy, red, and cracked skin. It's often linked to an overactive immune system, which mistakenly attacks healthy skin cells. This immune response causes inflammation, leading to the characteristic rash and discomfort. Eczema may appear anywhere on your body, but the hands are a common site.

Severe dryness and cracking of your skin, especially if accompanied by other symptoms like fatigue or weight gain, is sometimes a sign of hypothyroidism. Thyroid hormones

play a crucial role in maintaining healthy skin. When the thyroid gland is underactive, it can lead to dry, rough skin that is more prone to cracking.<sup>4</sup>

**Psoriasis** also affects the hands, appearing as scaly, silvery patches. Unlike eczema, psoriasis is characterized by rapid skin cell turnover, which leads to the buildup of these characteristic plaques. These patches are often itchy, painful and sometimes crack and bleed.

Changes in skin color and texture on your hands is also noteworthy. Healthy skin has a consistent tone and a smooth texture. However, certain conditions alter this. Raynaud's phenomenon is a condition that causes your fingers to turn white or blue in response to cold temperatures or stress. This happens because the small blood vessels in your fingers constrict, reducing blood flow.<sup>5</sup>

Imagine how your fingers feel when you're outside in freezing weather without gloves – that's similar to what someone with Raynaud's experiences, even in milder temperatures.

Carpal tunnel syndrome, a condition that affects the median nerve in your wrist, also causes numbness and tingling in your fingers. In some cases, this is accompanied by changes in skin color, such as paleness or blueness. This occurs because the compressed nerve can affect blood flow to the fingers. It's like having a kink in a garden hose.

## **Understanding Hand Pain from Aches to Stiffness**

Hand pain ranges from minor aches after a workout to severe, persistent discomfort. It's important to distinguish between normal muscle soreness and pain that indicates a more serious underlying condition. Normal muscle soreness usually occurs after physical activity and subsides within a few days. However, joint pain, especially when accompanied by stiffness or swelling, is a sign of a problem.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease where your body's immune system mistakenly attacks its own joint tissues. This leads to inflammation, pain and stiffness in your joints, often affecting your hands and wrists.

Osteoarthritis, on the other hand, is a degenerative joint disease caused by the wear and tear of cartilage, the smooth tissue that cushions the ends of bones in your joints. Over time, this cartilage breaks down, leading to pain, stiffness and reduced range of motion. Think of it like the shock absorbers in a car wearing out – the ride becomes bumpy and uncomfortable.

**Gout** is another form of arthritis caused by a buildup of uric acid crystals in your joints. While it commonly affects the big toe, it also affects other joints, including those in your hands. The buildup of these crystals causes intense pain, inflammation and swelling.

Swelling and numbness in your hands are also indicators of various health issues. It's important to differentiate between normal swelling, such as after exercise, and swelling that persists or is accompanied by other symptoms. Lymphedema is a condition that causes fluid buildup in your tissues, which affects your hands and arms. This happens when your **lymphatic system**, responsible for draining excess fluid, is blocked or damaged.

As mentioned earlier, carpal tunnel syndrome also causes swelling and numbness in your fingers due to compression of the median nerve in your wrist. This pressure on the nerve disrupts nerve signals, leading to these sensations.

Swelling in your hands and feet is also be a sign of kidney disease. Your kidneys play a role in regulating fluid balance in your body. When your kidneys are not functioning properly, fluid builds up in the tissues, leading to swelling, also known as edema.

## **Additional Hand Clues to Watch Out For**

Beyond the nail and skin changes, pain and swelling already discussed, there are other important signs your hands reveal. Redness of your hands, for instance, is a symptom of various conditions, including liver disease, rheumatoid arthritis, Graves' disease and even, in some cases, has been reported as a symptom of COVID-19.<sup>6</sup>

Hormonal changes, such as those experienced during pregnancy, also cause hand redness. Changes in hand strength are another significant indicator of overall health.

Research suggests **hand grip strength** is a reliable biomarker of your biological age.<sup>7</sup> It's suggested that grip strength is an indication of general muscle strength, which is important for endurance, balance and mobility.

The association between hand grip strength and the strength of your immune system was the focus of a 2022 study that concluded measuring hand strength allows for "preliminary predictions on the current level of immunity and inflammation in the body."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, studies have also found that hand grip strength is inversely associated with heart health and helps predict cardiovascular problems alongside family history, blood pressure and other indicators.<sup>9</sup>

## **The Allen Test for Assessing Blood Flow to Your Hands**

The Allen test is a simple screening procedure used to check the blood flow in your hands. It's especially important before medical procedures that might affect the arteries in your wrist, such as drawing blood from an artery, inserting a catheter (a thin tube) or even some types of surgery. The test helps ensure that there's enough blood supply to your hand even if one of the main arteries is temporarily or permanently blocked.

However, this quick and easy test also offers an early warning sign for **circulatory problems** that could be linked to heart health. This test was first described in 1929 by Dr. Edgar Van Nuys Allen and a modified version was developed in 1952 by Dr. Irving Wright. The modified Allen test (MAT) is the preferred method as it assesses each hand individually.<sup>10</sup> The blood supply to your hands comes primarily from two arteries in your forearm: the radial and ulnar arteries.

These arteries connect in your hand to form arches, ensuring that if one artery is blocked, the other usually still provides enough blood. The Allen test checks if these connections, called the palmar arches, are complete and working properly.

The modified Allen test is performed as follows: You make a tight fist, which pushes blood out of your hand, making it look pale. The person performing the test then presses

down firmly on both the radial and ulnar arteries at your wrist, stopping blood flow into your hand.

While still pressing on the arteries, you open your hand. Your palm should look pale. The person performing the test then releases pressure on one artery (for example, the ulnar artery) while still holding the other (the radial artery). They watch how quickly the color returns to your palm. This process is then repeated, releasing the other artery (the radial artery in this example) and observing the refill again.

In a normal, positive Allen test, color should return to your palm within five to 15 seconds after releasing one artery. This rapid return of color shows that the released artery is providing good blood flow to your hand when the other artery is compressed, indicating a complete palmar arch.<sup>11</sup>

This suggests there is good collateral circulation. If the color takes longer than 15 seconds to return, it's considered a negative Allen test, suggesting inadequate collateral circulation from the released artery.

This means that artery is not effectively supplying blood to the hand when the other is blocked. This could be a sign of underlying cardiovascular issues and should be investigated further by a medical professional. It's also wise to consider lifestyle changes that support better circulation, such as regular daily movement and a [healthy diet](#).

## **Recognizing Key Hand Signals for Better Health**

Paying attention to changes in your hands provides valuable insights into your overall health. From subtle changes in nail color and texture to skin changes, pain and swelling, your hands act as silent messengers, alerting you to underlying health problems.

If you notice any persistent or concerning changes in your hands, consult a holistic health care professional for proper evaluation and diagnosis. Early detection and treatment make a significant difference in managing various health conditions. By being proactive and informed, you take control of your health and well-being.

## Sources and References

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