

# Nails as health indicators

By W. GIFFORD-JONES, M.D.

How often do we look at a person's nails? Not often. But nails reveal much about a person's general health. So the next time you're invited to a dinner party, scan the nails. But if you want to be invited back, wait for another time to announce a guest is suffering from onychomycosis.

Is the person sitting next to you a bartender, lawyer, politician, nurse, or homemaker? The clue may be brittle, split nails, the result of frequently having hands in water day after day. Water passes through nails 100 times faster than through skin. This causes swelling of nails, and then when the hands are out of water, the nails become dry and shrink. This repeated accordion effect weakens nails, making them more susceptible to splitting. The best solution is the wearing of rubber gloves when hands are frequently exposed to water.

Have any of the dinner guests made the common mistake of slamming a drawer or door on their fingers? If so, see if you can spot Beau's lines, depressed horizontal marks that run across the nail. Unexpected trauma of this kind causes sudden interruption of nail keratin synthesis. The width and extent of depression varies according to the degree of trauma. But if you're lucky enough to be invited back for dinner in a year's time, you'll discover Beau's lines are gone. Nails grow at about one-tenth of a millimeter a day or about one inch every eight months.

But there's an off chance Beau's lines are not due to injury. Local disease at the base of the nail can also cause these depressions. In fact, the dinner guest may have suffered a generalized disease. Nails are very sensitive to acute illnesses. They may stop growing and cause a fine groove to appear across all 10 fingernails in the same location. So if the horizontal depressions are half way down the nails, you can look like a genius by asking if the guest had a serious



**PARTY:** A good time to observe the fingernails of others? PHOTOS.COM

illness four months ago.

Is another of the guests an uptight nail biter? Chronic trauma of this kind to the nail often results in what's called "paronychia." It's an infection in which bacteria get underneath tissue at the side of the nail causing swelling and irritation. Constant picking of the thumbnail cuticle can also cause this condition. So look for a localized infection at the margin of the skin and nail.

Take a look around the table to see if there's a silent heavy drinker present. Cirrhosis of the liver causes an abnormally opaque, white nail instead of the usual pink color produced by blood in the skin under the nail.

Skin disease can also make its presence known at the dinner table. For instance, those who have psoria-

sis may have small, round pits in the surface of the nails. And if anyone is suffering from a chronic iron deficiency, you'll notice spoon-shaped somewhat concave nails rather than the usual rounded surface.

There's a chance you may spot a dinner guest with the ugly nail syndrome, "onychomycosis." This fungus infection affects 2.5 percent of the population and causes much embarrassment and misery. Infection begins at the nail plate, the hard protective surface that is most visible and gradually spreads up the nail.

This person is often someone who wears heavy boots such as policemen and construction workers. Such footwear provides heat and moisture that fosters fungal infections of toenails. And ironically, the sufferer is often someone who fre-

quents a health club.

This diagnosis is usually easy. Yellowish-brown nails become thickened, cracked, and deformed, and eventually the nail may separate from the nail bed.

It's much more than a cosmetic problem. People with severely thickened, twisted nails find it impossible to button shirts or pick up something from the table. Others can't type or wear regular shoes.

But if your host or hostess has onychomycosis and you wish to be invited back, wait until another time to tell him or her that toenail fungus is treatable.

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**NIGHT LIFE:** Keeping late hours, if it causes sleep loss, can predispose to eating more. PHOTOS.COM

## Sleep less, eat more

### Curtailed sleep leads to increased food intake

By DR. JOHN BRIFFA

In March, a study was published in the journal *Sleep Medicine* that linked shorter sleep duration with an increased risk of diabetes [1]. Other research has found an association between relatively curtailed sleep and an increased risk of overweight and obesity.

Some of this research has found a potential explanation for this observation in the form of changes in appetite-regulating hormones such as leptin and ghrelin. Lower levels of the appetite-quelling leptin and higher levels of the appetite-stimulating ghrelin as a result of curtailed sleep might increase food intake and predispose to overweight and obesity.

In a recent study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* [2], the effect of sleep duration on leptin and ghrelin levels was assessed. Eleven adults were assessed for two 14-day periods. During one period, they were restricted to 5.5 hours of sleep a night. During the other, the prescribed nightly sleep time was 8.5 hours. This study found no difference in the levels of ghrelin or leptin between the two sleep periods.

However, food intake did differ between the two groups. The primary difference here was that during the shorter sleep phase, individuals ate an average of about 200 calories more each day. This additional consumption did not come during mealtime, but as

snacks. Not only that, the shorter sleep time was associated with an increase in the number of calories coming from carbohydrate: 61 percent of calories came from carbohydrate during the longer sleep phase, which increased to 64 percent when sleep was curtailed.

The authors of this study concluded, "Recurrent bedtime restriction can modify the amount, composition, and distribution of human food intake, and sleeping short hours in an obesity-promoting environment may facilitate the excessive consumption of energy from snacks but not meals."

The message from this study appears to be that if we want to keep our food intake in check, it may well help to make sure we get a decent amount of sleep each night.

#### References:

1. Chapat JP, et al. Sleep duration as a risk factor for the development of type 2 diabetes or impaired glucose tolerance: Analyses of the Quebec Family Study. *Sleep Med.* 2009 Mar 28. [Epub ahead of print]

2. Nedeltcheva AV, et al. Sleep curtailment is accompanied by increased intake of calories from snacks. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2009; 89(1): 126-33.

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## Bellyfit: Revolutionary fitness for women



**Bellyfit founder Alice Bracegirdle smiles while DJ Rowan Sentesy spins the tunes. Music is an integral part of a Bellyfit workout.** STEPHANIE RAE HULL

By ESTER HACK AND ADWEN WELSIE  
Epoch Times Staff

Why not dance your way to a flat tummy, sculpted thighs and glutes, better posture and a stronger mind-body connection? Bellyfit, the latest buzz in the fitness world, can achieve all this through a fusion of ancient and modern movements and techniques.

Designed for women of all shapes and sizes, Bellyfit classes include easy-to-learn cardio moves infused with belly dance and Bhangra African dance, as well as yoga, Pilates, and Mudra meditation.

Victoria-based Alice Bracegirdle, founder and CEO of Bellyfit, says the fitness regimen blends "the power and wisdom of ancient cultures with the research and trends of the modern world," and can enable women to "become connected to their power in a profound way."

"Bellyfit connects women to their primal feminine while delivering a potent, holistic workout," she says.

Not too many years ago, Bracegirdle was a single mom on welfare escaping an abusive relationship. Inspired to heal and become financially independent, she drew from her expertise in holistic health, fitness, dance, music and yoga, and Bellyfit was born.

She says the body can hold tension from the stress of daily life, and this creates a "rigidness" in the body that can cause problems.

"I believe we hold energy in our bodies, we hold emotion in our body—and often it is a negative

emotion."

If these negative emotions remain in the body long enough, they will eventually cause disease, she explains. This is where movement comes in.

"When we move the body that emotional energy that's stuck in our bodies moves through and hopefully comes out and is transformed into a positive energy. And that's what Bellyfit is all about. The energy in the body is meant to flow, just like the blood is always flowing through the body."

However, she notes that Bellyfit is not for everyone. "Not everybody is ready to move their body the way Bellyfit encourages—not everyone is ready to do that."

The music—"the heart and soul of the Bellyfit class experience"—used by Bellyfit instructors is composed of compilations of ethno-infused techno and tribal rhythms as well as more laid back ambient tracks.

Bracegirdle recently opened a new studio in Victoria, and together with her team of instructors has been conducting Bellyfit workshops in cities across the country.

Instructor Monique Salez says Bellyfit can be a source of solace for women in the economic downturn.

"In this economic climate many families are under incredible financial and emotional stress. When mom feels healthy and happy so does the entire family. Classes are affordable, so women can practice several times a week.

*More information on Bellyfit can be found at [www.bellyfit.ca](http://www.bellyfit.ca).*

## CDC sees 'encouraging signs' in H1N1 virus

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—There are "encouraging signs" that the new H1N1 virus, which has raised concerns of a pandemic, is no more dangerous than routine seasonal flu viruses that circulate annually, a top U.S. health official said on May 2.

Dr. Richard Besser, acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), also defended actions taken by U.S. authorities in trying to limit the impact of the new swine flu virus, saying there has not been an over-reaction.

"With seasonal flu, something that hits us every year, we see 36,000 [U.S.] deaths. Here, we're

seeing encouraging signs that this virus so far is not looking more severe than a strain that we would see during seasonal flu," Besser told "Fox News Sunday."

Besser said he still expects the virus to have a "significant impact on people's health."

"We're not out of the woods. The information that we've been getting over the past couple of days is encouraging," Besser said.

The CDC said 160 people in the United States are confirmed to have been infected with the new virus, including the death of one Mexican boy who was visiting relatives in Texas. Cases have

been confirmed from 21 of the 50 U.S. states, the CDC said.

In Mexico, the country hardest hit by the outbreak, 19 of the more than 100 suspected deaths from the new H1N1 virus have been confirmed.

"We are not over-reacting to this outbreak. With a new infectious disease, there's a lot of unknown, a lot of uncertainty," Besser said.

"And you basically get one shot. You get one chance to try and reduce the impact on people's health. And so what you do is you take a very aggressive approach. And as you learn more information, you can tailor your

response," Besser added.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said health authorities are developing vaccines for the next flu season as well as one specifically to address the new virus.

She said no decision has been made on whether to have full-scale manufacturing of a vaccine for the new virus.

"One of the things that we know is that even if this current situation seems to be lessening, if we are cautiously optimistic, we really don't know what's going to happen when real flu season hits with H1N1 virus," Sebelius told "Fox News Sunday."

## New tool helps predict Alzheimer's

CHICAGO (Reuters)—U.S. researchers have developed a checklist that can accurately predict whether a person over 65 is at high risk of developing Alzheimer's disease within six years.

The checklist of risk factors like slowness of mind or movement predicted about half the cases of dementia that developed in a group of elderly people over a six-year period, the researchers reported in the journal *Neurology* on May 13.

An estimated 26 million people globally have Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. The disease starts out with mild memory loss and confusion but escalates into complete memory loss and an inability to care for oneself.

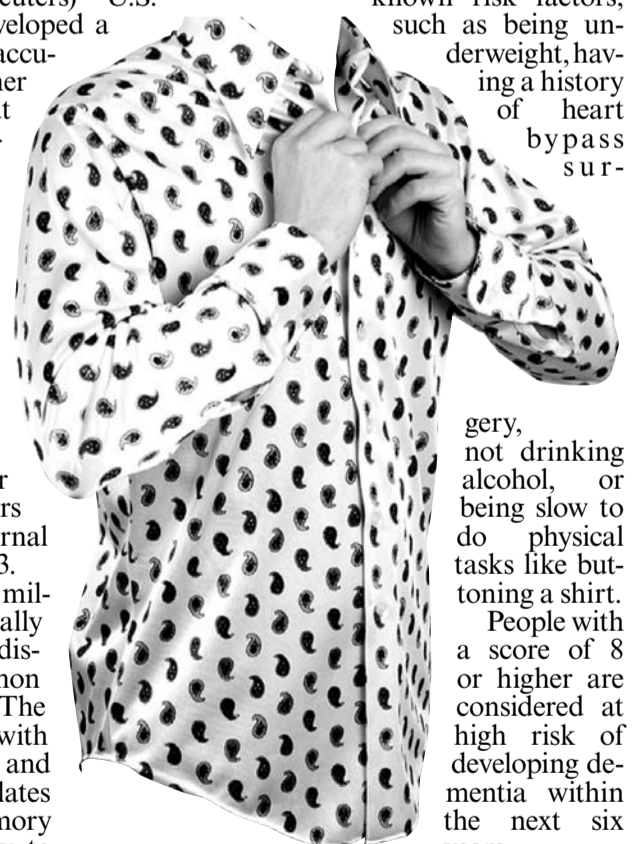
Researcher Deborah Barnes of the University of California, San Francisco, said having a tool that can predict the risk of developing Alzheimer's could help doctors keep an eye on patients and help companies develop drugs to treat the early stages of the mind-robbing disease, which has no cure and few effective treatments.

"This new risk index could be very important both for research and for people at risk of developing dementia and their families," Barnes said in a statement.

The tool consists of a 15-point scale of several well-known risk factors for Alzheimer's—advanced age, low scores on tests of thinking skills, and having the ApoE4 gene, which raises the genetic risks of developing it.

It also includes some lesser-

known risk factors, such as being underweight, having a history of heart bypass surgery,



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not drinking alcohol, or being slow to do physical tasks like buttoning a shirt.

People with a score of 8 or higher are considered at high risk of developing dementia within the next six years.

To develop the index, the team studied 3,375 people with an average age of 76 and no evidence of dementia. Over six years, 480 of the people developed dementia.

The researchers then looked to see which factors best predicted who would develop dementia.

When they evaluated the same group using the checklist, they found 56 percent of those with high scores had developed dementia within six years. That compared to 23 percent with moderate scores and just four percent with low scores.

Overall, the index correctly classified 88 percent of the participants.

Barnes said the risk index would need to be confirmed by other studies. Her team is also looking to see if a simpler version could be as accurate.