

Nailing Down the Facts: Nail Treatment Safety in Pregnancy

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If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, you might wonder if it is safe for you to go to the nail salon. After all, there are chemicals in nail treatments, and (let's face it) nail salons often smell like they could be toxic! But are they?

What's in nail treatments? And could they be harmful if I'm pregnant or nursing?

Common nail products include nail polish and types of acrylic nails including gels, liquids, and powders. There are a few ingredients that are commonly found in those products, including:

- Dibutyl phthalate (DBP)
- Toluene
- Formaldehyde
- Camphor
- Paraffin
- Methacrylic
- Acetone
- Acetonitrile

The names of those ingredients may sound scary, but let's look at each of them.

Dibutyl phthalate (DBP) is used in nail polish to make the polish more flexible and less likely to crack or break. Small amounts have been found in humans. Those small amounts are not expected to cause increased chances of problems for the pregnancy or breastfed baby based on the available research.

Toluene is a solvent that is used to thin nail polish so it goes smooth after being painted on with a brush. Solvents are known to be harmful to the nervous system. Sniffing or huffing spray paint, glue, and gasoline can cause dizziness and fainting in addition to damaging brain cells. But when it comes to nail treatments, the amount of toluene that is absorbed through the skin or inhaled from applying nail polish to finger and toe nails is small and not expected to increase the chance of problems for your pregnancy or breastfed baby.

Formaldehyde is used to harden nail polish. Nail salons might also use formaldehyde to disinfect nail care tools. Some people may be allergic to formaldehyde, even in the small amounts found in nail polish. Women with those allergies should use nail care products without formaldehyde and ask about its use in nail salons. Our bodies make formaldehyde and it can be found in healthy foods, such as apples. Just as too much water or oxygen can be dangerous for our bodies, too much formaldehyde can be a problem. However, the amount in nail polish is small and the amount that would be absorbed through the skin, nails, and from the fumes is also very small. That small amount is not expected to cause problems for your pregnancy or breastfed baby.

Camphor is also used to make nail polish soft or flexible and give it a pleasant odor. Camphor is found in some pain-relieving products that are applied to the skin. The amount of camphor in nail polish is far less than in those pain-relieving creams. Based on the limited information available, the use of camphor on the skin has not increased risks for a pregnancy or breastfed babies.

Paraffin is a mineral oil used in cosmetics and ointments to soften the skin. It isn't part of the nail polish or remover, but your hands or feet might soak in it as part of the manicure or pedicure. As an oil, it mainly stays on the skin and isn't absorbed into the bloodstream. The small amount of paraffin that is expected to get absorbed into the skin is not expected to increase the chance of problems for your pregnancy or breastfed baby.

Methacrylate is a chemical in acrylic nails. Not much of the methacrylate is left after it reacts with other chemicals to

form the acrylic nails. However, the small amount that is left in the acrylic nails could cause irritation, redness, and swelling in the tissues under and below the nails. The small amount of methacrylate that is expected to be absorbed by the skin or lungs from using acrylic nails is not expected to cause an increased chance of problems for your pregnancy or breastfed baby.

Acetone is a solvent used in nail polish removers. Acetone, when ingested, can cause problems in the body. The small amount of acetone that is expected to be absorbed by the skin or lungs when it is used to remove nail polish is small and not expected to cause an increased chance of problems for your pregnancy or breastfed baby. After using nail polish remover, you might want to wash your hands or feet to reduce the amount that is left on the skin that could be absorbed.

Acetonitrile is another solvent used for removing artificial nails. It is less commonly used in cosmetics than acetone. The small amounts that are expected to be absorbed through the skin, nails, or lungs are not expected to increase the chances of problems for your pregnancy or breastfed baby.

But what about the smell?

The smell in nail salons is caused by the chemicals in the various treatments they offer. If there is good air flow and plenty of fresh air, then it is not likely that much of the chemicals will get into the body by breathing the fumes. But if you have headaches, dizziness, or nausea while around nail care products, take a break and get some fresh air outside.

So what's the take-away?

Go ahead, pamper yourself with pretty nails! Using these cosmetic products as part of routine nail treatments should not cause you any concern, as there are no known increased risks for your pregnancy or your breastfed baby.

If you have questions about exposures during pregnancy or breastfeeding, contact an expert at MotherToBaby. You can reach us by phone at 866-626-6847 or by text at 855-999-3525. You can also email or live chat with us by visiting <https://MotherToBaby.org>.



Alfred Romeo, RN, PhD, is a nurse and health educator. He has been with MotherToBaby for fifteen years, has served as the chair of various committees, and has served in many roles on the Board of the Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS)/ MotherToBaby. His experiences include working as a nurse in newborn intensive care units, training medical homes to improve services for children with special needs, and training young adults with disabilities in leadership and advocacy.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://www.MotherToBaby.org).

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