



Salon hygiene can be a nail biter

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Joan Schoenfeld just assumed that if a nail salon was open and had a license, the manicurist would follow sanitary standards and proper procedures.

A few fungi, infections and damaged nail beds later, she knows the salon she once frequented in east Jefferson County was not a good bet.

Those are the stories that make personal responsibility essential when choosing a nail salon, especially as so many pop up in new shopping centers across Jefferson and Shelby counties, said Bob McKee, executive director of the Alabama Board of Cosmetology.

Eight inspectors are responsible for about 6,000 salons in Alabama, he said, including about 1,450 in Jefferson and Shelby counties.

But individuals, more than any periodic state inspection, must decide whether a salon is acceptable, he said.

"We can't say that a salon was good yesterday or tomorrow," McKee said. "We can only say it was good the day we inspected it. Visiting a pedicurist or manicurist should not be any kind of a hazard, but if the rules are not followed, it can be a hazard. We don't want to frighten people, but one of the first things they should do is check the inspection score on the wall.

"It is just like a restaurant," he said. "Would you want to visit a restaurant with a score from the health department below 90 or 88?"

Schoenfeld found out the hard way.

"We need to be more educated about these things," she said. "There are so many of these places opening up everywhere. I kept noticing they were using the same paper towel for several customers. That's what did it for me. When I finally left, I had so much damage to my nails it took eight or nine months to grow them out."

Schoenfeld will not be giving her former salon high marks, which her friends and family should consider, McKee said. Along with looking at the state inspection, consider the salon's reputation and references, he said.

Beth O'Meara, of north Shelby County, did those things when she discovered the L'Amour nail salon near Greystone. Her mother has had a weekly appointment for years, and a perfect 100 inspection score is posted by the front door.

"Not every place is as clean as this," O'Meara said. "There have been a few times when I was uncomfortable at other places. I questioned the cleanliness of the tools."

L'Amour owner David Le said people pay for what they get. An example: Some salons will use illegal callous razors instead of buying the more expensive chemical callous remover, he said. Other shortcuts may be taken when sanitizing the equipment.

If the prices seem too cheap, the products and the service will be the same, he said.

Patti Carden, a licensed manicurist for 25 years, said it is hard for the Board of Cosmetology to track down all the salons skimping on sanitary and health standards.

"You have so many shops when you have a population of over a million in this area," she said. "And when the inspectors are in an area, the shops call and warn each other."

Carden, who once owned her own shop, said she has horror stories of women who came to her after contracting a fungus or other infection at another salon. But some of the worst cases are when a manicurist drills too far down on acrylic nails and enters the natural nail bed. That's what happened to Schoenfeld.

McKee said some places are using drills not designed for nails, but, unless they exceed a certain power level, inspectors can do nothing about them.

Pedicures present the most opportunities to get infections and should never be done within 24 hours of shaving legs, McKee said. Customers also should check to make sure the practitioner sanitizes the tub after every person and that the filters are cleaned daily. They should check to see how the instruments are sanitized after every customer, along with the general cleanliness of the salon.

Dr. Barry Ginsburg, a Birmingham dermatologist, said he occasionally gets a patient with infections soon after getting a manicure or pedicure.

"In general, these places do a good job of sterilizing the instruments," he said. "People think it is unclean instruments, but I think it is over-aggressive treatment of the cuticles that causes more problems. They are trained to get rid of the cuticles, and I don't know why. The cuticles are a necessary part of the nail anatomy. If I was getting one (manicure or pedicure), I would tell them to leave the cuticles."

Another problem Ginsburg sees is when a patient leaves acrylic and other fake nails on too long.

"I would allow the nail to breathe," he suggested. "Don't leave them on for six months."

E-mail: losburn@bhamnews.com NEWS STAFF/JERRY AYRES Instruments are sterilized by heat at the L'Amour nail salon near Greystone. The salon received a perfect 100 score in an Alabama Board of Cosmetology inspection.

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