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Safety tips for pedicures

LINDA CONLEY, Staff Writer

Beauty salon owner Angela C. DePaul doesn't mind talking about the fungus she developed under one of her toenails because it occurred after she had a pedicure at a local salon several years ago.

The fungus isn't harmful, but the infected nail isn't pleasant to look at. She keeps her toenails polished because she doesn't like looking at the ugly nail.

Her bad experience was a minor one, but she knows the problem could have been worse. She could have developed a much more serious infection that might have caused a variety of health problems and possibly death.

"I know it could have been worse," DePaul said. "I make sure now that I get my pedicures done by someone I know cleans and sanitizes their implements and footbaths."

Her daughter-in-law, Angela R. DePaul, is a nail technician and does her pedicures at their salon, Panache, on Reidville Road in Spartanburg.

A 46-year-old Texas woman wasn't as fortunate when she developed a staph infection after having a pedicure this past July. She got the infection after visiting a neighborhood salon and died in February from cardiac arrest following complications from the staph infection in her foot.

"It is uncommon to get a staph infection from a pedicure and die," said Dr. Robert Canty, director of infectious diseases at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. "But if someone has a mycobacteria infection and other types of bacteria get into the infected tissues and cause secondary problems, such as a staph infection, then it can be fatal."

Canty said physicians didn't recognize the type of infection the Texas woman developed. He said the woman's staph infection was similar to an outbreak that happened in northern California about four years ago and reported in the "New England Journal of Medicine."

"None of the people with the infections in northern California died because they were treated with a combination of antibiotics," he said. "The infections can be treated once doctors figure out the problem."

Several weeks before the Texas woman's death, the S.C. Board of Cosmetology issued a safety advisory on footbaths because of two cases of mycobacteria skin infections occurring after

pedicures in two salons across the state.

One of those salons was A-Deva Day Spa in downtown Spartanburg. Last October, the spa received a visit from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control after a client complained to the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation that she had gotten an infection after getting a pedicure at the spa.

Jerrie Hughes, owner of A-Deva Day Spa, said when DHEC officials came to inspect the salon and told her about the infection she couldn't believe it.

"All I kept thinking was, if this stuff is so bad then why don't I have it, why didn't our pedicurist have it," Hughes said.

Hughes said the spa was cleaning and sanitizing the footbaths but didn't realize there was a filter that also needed to be cleaned and sanitized. The filter, which looks like a screen on the back of the tub, had never been checked by DHEC officials in prior inspections, she said. Bacteria and mycobacterium were discovered in the filters of pedicure tubs at the spa.

"I had even given my daughter a pedicure in what DHEC said was the dirtiest tub, and she didn't have it (the infection)," Hughes said.

Through her own research, Hughes learned that the bacteria could grow anywhere there's standing water. She said DHEC officials watched her clean and sanitize the tubs, but the spa hasn't changed any of their methods for cleaning, aside from the replacement of the filter.

"We clean our tubs both before a pedicure and after one, just as we always have" Hughes said. "We sign a chart that tells who cleaned the tub and when it was cleaned."

Hughes said she reminds her customers and the public at large, "Ladies, if you are going to have a pedicure, do not shave your legs."

Canty echoes her thoughts.

"Mycobacteria grows in water," Canty said. "The women in South Carolina developed the skin infections because they were shaving their legs before the pedicures and the bacteria entered their bodies through the broken skin."

Canty said mycobacterium is a slow moving organism that could take about a week to develop. He said the area will become infected and a boil will develop on the foot.

"The boil is usually a big red spot about the size of a dime or a quarter and is raised," he said. "It is like any other abscess because it is painful."

Canty recommends seeing a physician if anyone develops such an abscess after having a pedicure.

"People such as diabetics and smokers with circulation problems could be vulnerable," he said.

DHEC spokesman Thom Berry said there haven't been any more complaints of clients receiving skin infections from mycobacteria after receiving pedicures at nail and day salons across the state.

Nail technicians at several local salons are aware of the dangers of not cleaning and sanitizing their instruments and footbaths. Some of them said they take precautions to ensure the safety of their clients and themselves.

"We have two portable footbaths that don't have the filters, but they still have to be cleaned and sanitized," Angela R. DePaul said. "When one footbath is being used, the other one is being sanitized and can be used with the next customer."

Dana Melton, manicurist at Dee Charles Salon and Spa, 600 Oak Forest Road, said she does not touch a client that has bruises, sores or fungus on their feet.

"I tell them to go to the doctor first, because I will not touch their feet," she said. "I have to protect myself, too, because I can also catch an infection from someone."

The salons have a routine where they clean and sanitize instruments and footbaths after each client. The thorough cleaning and sanitizing is also a state requirement for the salons. At the end of the day, more cleaning and sanitizing has to be done.

"Everything has to be cleaned when giving pedicures and manicures and not just footbaths," said Susan Grimsley, cosmetologist and instructor and owner of an upcoming salon called Susie's Snappy Scissors on Pine Street. "The table, finger bowls and clippers also have to be cleaned and sanitized."

Carolyn Waddell of Roebuck has been receiving pedicures and manicures for about 15 years. She gets them about once a month at local salons. She pays careful attention to make sure the salons clean and sanitize instruments and footbaths.

"I am very picky about where I go because I am concerned about picking up a germ or something," she said. "I observe to make sure the salon cleans and sanitizes after each person. If the salon doesn't do it, I don't go back."

Sonya Stroble of Spartanburg said she has to be careful when receiving pedicures because she is a diabetic. She doesn't want to get any cuts that can cause infections.

"I get pedicures when they need to be done," she said. "I watch when the pedicures are being done, and I plan to watch more carefully now that there have been some cases of infections reported."

Linda Conley can be reached at 562-7213 or linda.conley@shj.com.
