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Rocky Mountain News ©

Kaiser bans fake nails for caregivers

By Debra Melani, Rocky Mountain News
January 21, 2003

Responding to growing evidence that fake nails can pose a danger within a health-care setting, Kaiser Permanente this month banned artificial nails for its caregivers in all its facilities nationwide.

Experts say other health-care providers have issued similar bans, and more are poised to follow suit. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued guidelines recommending bans at least for caregivers who treat high-risk patients.

While those in the industry agree that consumers should be aware, many believe the risks are being overblown.

Initially, Kaiser Permanente nurse Rosemary Myers thought a ban was an overreaction.

"I felt it was just a hygiene issue rather than an acrylic-nails issue," Myers said.

Then Myers read a handful of studies linking artificial nails with disease outbreaks in hospitals, including one that killed 16 infants in a neonatal intensive-care unit in Oklahoma.

Nurses with artificial nails investigated in the studies were more likely to carry the offending bacteria on their hands and/or were found to provide the most care to the sickened patients.

Nancy King, a nail technician in Phoenix and an independent industry consultant, pointed out that some of the studies cited in the growing artificial-nail debate fail to draw a line between long and fake nails. She believes improper hand hygiene, not artificial nails, spurred the epidemics.

Long nails not vigorously scrubbed will hide germs under the tips, said Mark Fallos, a nail technician at Salon Armand, in Denver. And efficient hand-washers are a rare breed, even in health-care settings, he and King said.

But other studies have shown that artificial-nail wearers harbor more germs on their hands than their natural-nail counterparts do, both

before and after hand-washing, said Peggy SaBell, infection-control manager for Kaiser Permanente (see graphic).

It's no secret that fingernails in general harbor and spread bugs. When doctors emphasize hand-washing during flu and cold season, most of the bugs that go down the drain come from the nails.

Fallos and King say proper care and a good nail technician are all that people need for safe acrylic-nail wear. They recommend scrubbing vigorously, promptly removing nails that come loose and finding a good salon.

Myers said the evidence is enough for her: "I want to do what is in the best interest of my patient. I wouldn't go in with a dirty HIV needle and endanger them that way. Why would I do it with my hands?"

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