Dear Alice,

When you go to a beauty salon for a manicure, pedicure, waxing, whatever, where you're likely to be poked and prodded by various implements during the service, how much of a risk are you running of picking up a communicable disease?

Signed,

What Price Beauty?

Answer

Dear What Price Beauty?,

Plans to be buffed, bedazzled, and beautified can certainly be busted by concerns of health risks, but you ask a great question when seeking out salon services. Overall, the risk of contracting a communicable disease from a beauty salon procedure is quite small. While the likelihood of infections at a salon is minimal, if you were to contract something, it may be a fungal or bacterial infection of the manipulated area. However, if a salon doesn't dispose of single-use items or properly clean and disinfect instruments, there's small potential for transmission of bloodborne pathogens. With a little homework and a critical eye, there are some ways to help you reduce the risk of getting an infection at a salon, spa, or similar places:

**Check for licensing.** Look around to see if the professionals are licensed, including the manicurist, pedicurist, waxer, etc. If a license isn't on display, then ask to see their professional license before starting. If no license is presented, you may want to opt for another salon instead.

**Get a feel for the place.** Take some time to inspect the area carefully before getting serviced. Here is a list of questions to help guide you:

- Is the general overall appearance tidy and sanitary?
- Are the supplies clean and orderly?
- Are instruments immersed or stored in a disinfectant solution in front of the client immediately before use?
- Is the disinfectant clear and free of debris?
- Do the towels look fresh and clean?
- Are paper towels and other disposable supplies (such as cotton and sponge applicators)
only used once?
- Are the operators wearing protective equipment (gloves and masks)?
- Are all fluids, creams, and powders being dispensed with shakers, dispenser pumps, spatulas, or sprays to prevent contamination?
- Are finger bowls, pedicure bowls, and footbaths cleaned, rinsed, and disinfected after each use?
- Is the trash properly discarded in covered wastebaskets?
- Is the working environment well ventilated (no strong chemical odor) and is it well lit?
- Do the employees **wash their hands** [2] right before attending to each client or service?
- Are customers asked to wash up as well?
- Are new emery boards, block buffers, and waxing sticks being used for each client?

Ideally, the answers to all of these questions are "yes." If you don't feel comfortable for any reason, it's a good idea to trust your instincts and look for another salon that feels more acceptable to you.

**Whenever possible, avoid procedures that could break the skin and cause bleeding.**
For example, instead of cuticle trimmings, opt for using a cuticle remover lotion, or try requesting the nail technician push the cuticles back instead of cutting them. Also, it may be helpful to consult a dermatologist for removing corns and calluses. Note that it can be risky to use a razor on calluses; it's best to stick with safer tools such as a pumice stone to reduce the risk of cuts and infections.

**To further minimize health risks, try bringing your own manicure or pedicure kit.** Ask if the salon employee may be able to use your personal kit which may be purchased inexpensively every time you get a manicure or pedicure. Also, be sure to clean and sanitize your set of instruments after every use.

Fungal nail infections [3] are more likely to occur in those who get manicures or pedicures with tools that have been used on other people. Besides purchasing your own mani-pedi kit, you might also bring your own sandals (if you're getting a pedi) to cut back on your risk of a fungal infection. Fungal nail infection symptoms include a change in nail shape, discoloration, or increased brittleness or thickness. Though it might be tempting, avoid covering it up with nail polish or artificial nails, as this may potentially trap moisture and worsen the infection. Over-the-counter creams and ointments generally don't help treat nail fungus; you may need to see a health care provider for prescription oral antifungal medicines to clear the infection.

If you experience redness or swelling in any treated areas following a visit to the salon, it may be wise to purchase antibacterial ointment and follow the directions for use. If the infection persists or becomes worse, it's best to seek help from a medical professional.

Here's to getting primped and not poked,

Alice!

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