

WHERE'S THE CUTICLE?

If you asked me, "Doug, what part of the natural nail would you most want to be?" I would never reply, "the cuticle." Who would want to be a cuticle? The poor cuticle; it's so misunderstood by almost everyone! Think about this and you'll see what I mean. During the first part of the manicure, the "cuticle" is being gently massaged with a wonderful smelling "cuticle cream," to soften, moisturize, pamper it into a satiny smooth condition. That's a pretty standard service in most salons.

During the next step of the manicure/pedicure nail technicians apply cuticle remover to break down and dissolve the cuticle tissue for quick and easy removal from the nail plate. Cuticle tissue ~~must~~ be removed from the nail plate to ensure better adhesion of nail polish or artificial nail coatings. Wait? How can both be done? Should we pamper the cuticles or remove them from the nail plate? What's going on here?

Words Matter

Just what is the cuticle? If you ask different people, you will get different answers. The reason for this perplexing situation is clear; the problem is the incorrect usage of professional terminology. Being an American, I may use some words differently than someone in the UK or Canada, however, there are certain words that everyone in the professional nail industry should always use correctly. One of those words is "cuticle." After all, it's a part of the nail so nail professionals should be able to identify it correctly.

It's important to realize that the living skin at the base of the nail plate is NOT the cuticle. This living skin is called the eponychium, even though it's usually the first place people will point to when asked to identify the cuticle. It is also important to know that the cuticle is made entirely of dead skin. In other words, any skin that's still alive cannot be the cuticle. Also, hardened/callus tissue that forms on the eponychium as a result of being repeatedly cut by nippers is NOT the cuticle.

It's also not correct to refer to cuticle tissue as "pterygium," since that is a medical word for abnormal skin growth stretched into a triangular or wing-like shape. Nail pterygium does occur, but it's fairly unusual and occurs only under certain circumstances. For example, seriously injured or badly burned fingers. In such cases, the eponychium remains firmly attached to the nail plate and does let go, as it normally does, slowly stretches the eponychium into the classic wing-like shape of a pterygium. One common form of pterygium is found in the eye and is usually an inherited disorder or an injury caused by excessive exposure to outdoor elements.

So Where Is The Cuticle?

Here are the facts: the cuticle actually comes from the underside of the eponychium, where this living tissue presses against the newly forming nail plate (see figure 1).

Interestingly, the cuticle is one of the stickiest tissues on the entire body. The cuticle tissue is so sticky that it bonds tightly to the nail plate and is difficult to remove. As the natural nail plate continues to grow, it pulls off a thin layer of skin, detaching it from the underside of the eponychium and dragging it away. In other words, the detached dead tissue hitches a ride on the nail plate. That's why it appears to grow from under the living skin. This thin layer of colorless tissue is called the cuticle (see Figure 2). The cuticle creates an important barrier to block pathogens and help prevent infections in the nail matrix area where the nail plate is made. Infections of the nail matrix can lead to deformity or loss of the nail plate or even bone infections, so nail

professionals must always be careful in the cuticle area to prevent injury and avoid breaking this necessary seal. Careful handling of the eponychium and cuticle is very important to preventing infections and keeping the natural nail plate healthy.

During a properly performed manicure or pedicure, the eponychium is softened, moisturized and then very gently pushed back to expose the dead cuticle tissue on the nail plate for easier removal. Always take proper care while working in this sensitive area. Improperly performed, this part of the service can cause problems for clients. For example, applying artificial nail coatings over the cuticle will block adhesion and cause the coating to lift or peel from the natural nail plate. The same is true for nail polish. Many wasted hours of valuable time are lost performing repairs caused by careless removal of the cuticle tissue. Because improper cuticle removal can lead to potentially serious nail infections or deformities, it is very important to avoid overly aggressive removal techniques and never dig back underneath the living skin. It is acceptable to gently push back the living eponychium, but do not place any instrument underneath the skin itself, since this can damage this critical protective barrier, thereby increasing the risk of injury and/or infection. Even a wooden pusher can cause damage or injury if used too aggressively.

Never Cut Living Tissue

Sharp instruments can inflict serious injury, so use them carefully during manicures and pedicures. It is important to remember, never cut any living skin around the nail plate. This practice can lead to a wide variety of infections, including warts. Finally, follow manufacturer's directions, especially while using cuticle removers. Take care and use them only as directed. These products can be potentially irritating and may cause skin/nail damage if not used correctly. Always remember, it is important for nail professionals to respect both the cuticle and eponychium. Together, they form an important barrier that helps to protect the nail matrix.

Some may believe it doesn't matter if we use the correct terminology, but I don't understand this thinking. One of the hallmarks of any profession is the use of proper terminology. Would you want your blood drawn by a nurse who didn't know the difference between your veins and arteries? How much faith would you have in a plumber who constantly referred to the dishwasher as a toilet? We'd all probably find it more difficult to respect them, despite having good skills. Using proper terminology prevents confusion and misunderstanding, as well as raises professional standards. It's up all of us to understand and use proper terminology, if we expect to establish ourselves as true professionals. So, next time you're applying that oil or lotion and pushing back the skin, stop and think... are you working on the eponychium or the cuticle?

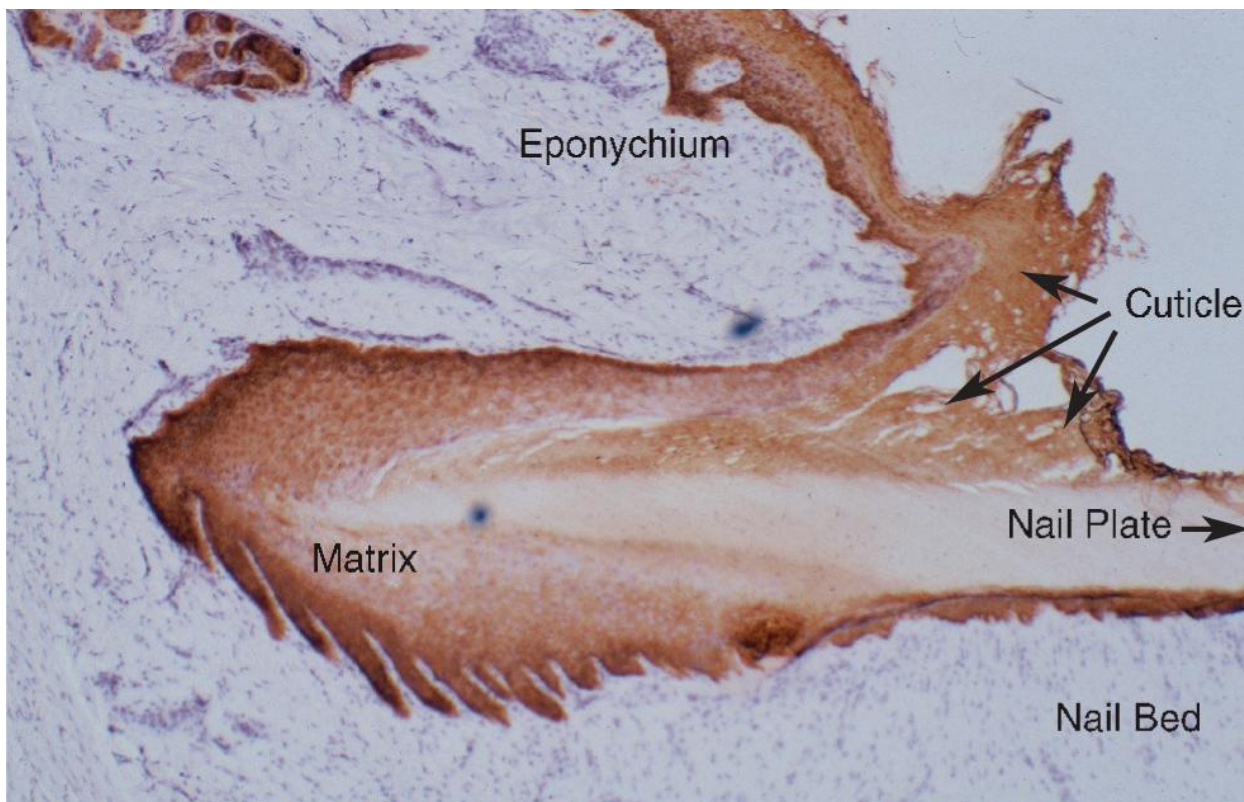


Figure (1) (Cross section of nail showing cuticle tissue adhering to the top side of the nail plate and becoming detached) "Reprinted from Nail Structure and Product Chemistry, Doug Schoon, 2005".

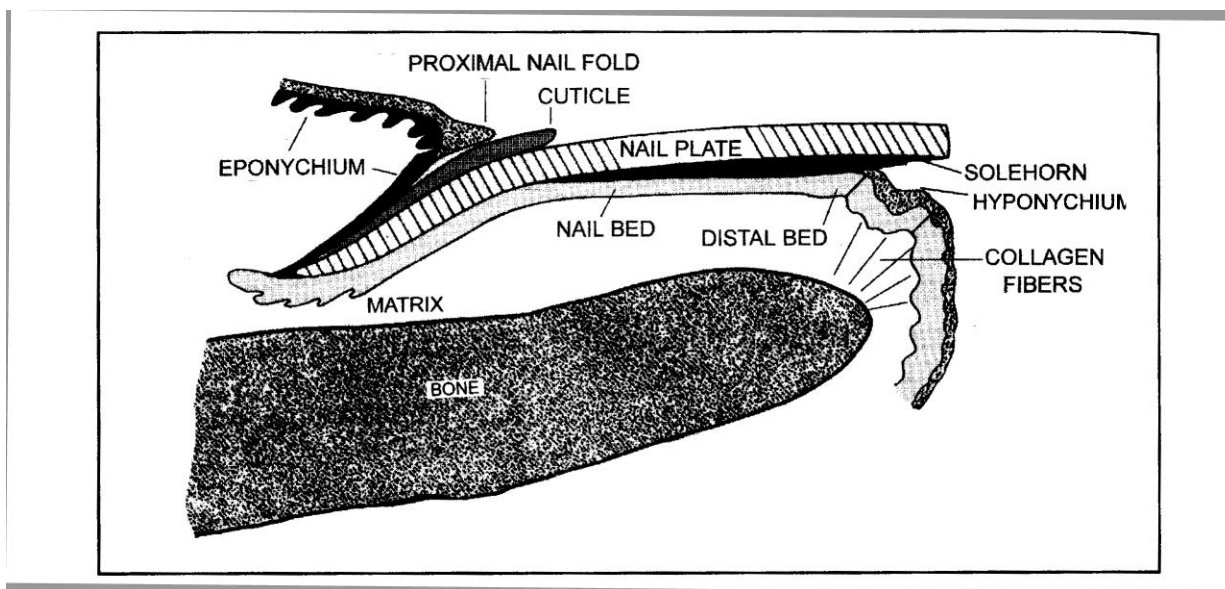


Figure (2) (Cross section of the nail showing its various parts) "Reprinted from Nail Structure and Product Chemistry, Doug Schoon, 2005".