CONDITION

Nail polish poisoning

Nail polish poisoning is illness caused by swallowing polish or breathing concentrated amounts of its chemical vapors.

WHAT IT IS
Harmful exposure to nail polish chemicals

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous system, lungs, digestive system, heart, liver, and kidneys

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea, drowsiness, throat irritation, breathing problems

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing polish or breathing concentrated solvent fumes

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, examination, and targeted blood and heart tests

MAIN TREATMENT
Poison-centre guidance, supportive care, and symptom monitoring

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - most acute exposures fully resolve

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - trouble breathing, collapse, seizure, or severe drowsiness

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually full recovery; repeated inhalation can cause lasting harm

Overview

Nail polish poisoning happens when chemicals in nail polish enter the body in a harmful amount. This most often follows swallowing the product or deliberately breathing concentrated fumes. Heavy exposure can also occur in a poorly ventilated room or workplace.

Nail polish contains a mixture of solvents, resins, colorants, and other ingredients. Solvents keep the polish liquid in the bottle and then evaporate as it dries. Depending on the product, these may include ethyl acetate, butyl acetate, isopropyl alcohol, or toluene. Formulas differ, so the product label matters.

A brief smell during normal use is not the same as poisoning. A small accidental taste may cause no symptoms or only mild mouth or stomach irritation. Larger exposures can affect the brain, lungs, heart, liver, or kidneys.

Nail polish poisoning is not the same as nail polish remover poisoning. Removers often contain acetone or other solvents in different concentrations and need separate advice.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the product, amount, route of exposure, and length of time involved. They may begin within minutes or over several hours.

Swallowing nail polish may cause:

Breathing concentrated fumes may irritate the eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. You may develop coughing, chest discomfort, headache, nausea, light-headedness, or difficulty concentrating. Very high exposure can slow breathing or cause loss of consciousness.

Severe poisoning may lead to abnormal heart rhythms, seizures, dangerously slow breathing, or coma. These effects are uncommon after ordinary use but are possible after a large exposure or intentional inhalation.

Repeated exposure over weeks, months, or years may produce a different pattern. Symptoms can include frequent headaches, memory or concentration problems, mood changes, numbness, weakness, or ongoing irritation of the eyes and airways. Certain solvents can also disturb the body's acid and mineral balance or injure the liver and kidneys.

Nail polish in the eye usually causes burning, redness, watering, and blurred vision. Skin contact can cause dryness, redness, or irritation, especially with repeated exposure.

- Burning or irritation of the mouth and throat
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Dizziness, headache, or poor coordination
- Unusual sleepiness, confusion, or slurred speech

Causes and risk factors

Poisoning is caused by exposure to enough of one or more chemicals in the polish to interfere with normal body functions. Because products have different formulas, the exact effects cannot be predicted from the words "nail polish" alone.

Common exposure situations include:

Young children are at higher risk of accidental swallowing. People who work in nail salons may have repeated exposure to several products during a shift. Risk is affected by ventilation, the

chemicals used, how often they are handled, and whether workplace safety controls are followed.

Intentional inhalation is particularly dangerous because the amount reaching the lungs and brain can rise quickly. Fumes may also reduce judgment, making falls, burns, or other injuries more likely.

- A child drinking from an open bottle
- Swallowing polish intentionally
- Deliberately inhaling fumes to feel intoxicated
- Using large amounts in a small, poorly ventilated area
- Repeated workplace exposure without effective ventilation
- Spilling polish into the eyes or over a large area of skin

Diagnosis

There is no single test that confirms every case of nail polish poisoning. Diagnosis is usually based on the exposure history, symptoms, physical examination, and the ingredients listed on the container or safety data sheet.

A healthcare team or poison specialist may ask:

In a medical setting, checks may include breathing rate, oxygen level, blood pressure, temperature, and alertness. An electrocardiogram, or ECG, may be used to check the heart's electrical rhythm.

Blood tests may look for changes in body salts, acidity, blood sugar, and liver or kidney function. A chest X-ray may be needed if there is coughing, breathing difficulty, or concern that liquid entered the lungs. Routine drug screens do not reliably identify every solvent found in nail products.

Bring the bottle or a clear photograph of its label if it is safe to do so. Do not delay emergency care while searching for it.

- The exact product name and ingredients, if known
- Whether it was swallowed, inhaled, or spilled
- Approximately how much was involved
- When the exposure happened
- What symptoms have developed

- Whether other substances were involved

Treatment and management

Treatment depends on the product, amount, symptoms, and route of exposure. Most care is supportive, meaning it protects breathing, circulation, and other body functions while the chemicals leave the body. There is no single antidote for the usual nail polish mixture.

For swallowed polish, do not make the person vomit. Vomiting can allow solvent-containing liquid to enter the lungs. Do not give food or drink to anyone who is very drowsy, vomiting repeatedly, having a seizure, or struggling to swallow.

After inhaling fumes, move into fresh air if this can be done without exposing anyone else. Do not enter a heavily contaminated enclosed space without trained help.

For eye exposure, remove contact lenses if they come out easily and rinse the eye with clean, lukewarm water for 15 to 20 minutes. Avoid rubbing the eye. Wash polish from the skin with soap and water, and remove contaminated clothing.

Contact a poison centre for advice after swallowing nail polish, deliberate inhalation, significant fume exposure, or symptoms following exposure. In the United States, Poison Control can be reached at 1-800-222-1222. Elsewhere, use your local poison information service.

Hospital treatment may include oxygen, intravenous fluids, medicines for symptoms, and monitoring of heart rhythm and blood test results. Severe breathing problems may require a breathing tube and mechanical ventilation. Seizures, abnormal rhythms, and major chemical imbalances are treated as they occur.

Procedures to empty the stomach are not routine. They may increase the risk of liquid entering the lungs and are considered only in unusual circumstances by specialists.

Complications

Most small accidental exposures do not cause lasting harm. Complications are more likely after a large swallowed amount, prolonged concentrated inhalation, delayed rescue from an enclosed space, or repeated intentional use.

Possible complications include:

Repeated solvent inhalation can damage the brain and peripheral nerves, which carry signals between the brain, spinal cord, and body. Problems with memory, movement, coordination, hearing, or sensation may persist in some people. The risk depends greatly on the chemical,

intensity, and duration of exposure.

- Chemical irritation or inflammation in the lungs
- Low oxygen caused by slowed or ineffective breathing
- Abnormal heart rhythms
- Seizures or loss of consciousness
- Liver or kidney injury
- Serious disturbances in body salts or acidity
- Injury from falls, burns, or impaired judgment

Prevention

Nail polish poisoning can often be prevented. Store polish in its original, tightly closed container, out of sight and reach of children. A high shelf may not be enough if a child can climb, so a locked cabinet is safer.

Use nail products in a well-ventilated area. Close bottles when they are not being used and clean spills promptly. Keep polish away from food and drink containers so it cannot be mistaken for something safe to swallow.

Never sniff or inhale nail polish deliberately. If intentional inhalation is happening, support is available through medical, mental health, or substance-use services. This behavior can become difficult to stop and may cause serious harm even without daily use.

People working with nail products should follow the product safety data sheets and workplace controls. Local exhaust ventilation, covered waste containers, safe storage, and appropriate protective equipment can reduce exposure. Ordinary paper or surgical masks do not filter solvent vapors.

Living with it and what to expect

After a small, one-time exposure, symptoms often improve as the body clears the chemicals. Mild nausea, headache, or irritation may settle within hours, although the exact course depends on the product and amount.

A person assessed in an emergency department may need observation until breathing, alertness, heart rhythm, and other findings remain stable. Follow-up blood tests may be arranged if there were changes in liver function, kidney function, body salts, or acidity.

Recovery after severe poisoning can take longer. Lung irritation may worsen for several hours after the exposure, especially if liquid entered the airway. Neurological symptoms such as poor balance or confusion may require further assessment.

With repeated workplace or intentional exposure, improvement may take weeks or months after the exposure stops. Some nerve, hearing, memory, liver, or kidney effects can be long-lasting. Ongoing symptoms should be reviewed rather than assumed to be part of normal nail product use.

Routine follow-up is appropriate for headaches, coughing, skin irritation, concentration problems, or other symptoms that repeatedly occur around nail products. A healthcare professional or occupational health service can review the pattern and whether workplace exposure controls need attention.

When to get medical help

Call emergency services now if someone exposed to nail polish:

Do not leave an unconscious person alone. Place them on their side if they are breathing and it is safe to do so. Do not give anything by mouth.

Contact a poison centre promptly after more than a small taste, any intentional swallowing or inhalation, or an exposure involving an unknown amount. Call even if symptoms have not started, because the product ingredients and circumstances affect what monitoring is needed.

Seek urgent medical advice if coughing, repeated vomiting, increasing sleepiness, eye pain, blurred vision, or persistent breathing symptoms develop.

Arrange routine medical or occupational health follow-up for symptoms that keep returning during nail product use, or for problems with memory, balance, sensation, mood, breathing, or skin over time.

- Has trouble breathing or very slow breathing
- Collapses, faints, or cannot be awakened normally
- Has a seizure
- Develops blue, grey, or unusually pale lips or skin
- Is severely confused or unable to stand
- Has severe chest pain or an abnormal heartbeat sensation

Common questions

What should I do if my child tastes nail polish?

Remove the bottle, wipe or rinse the child's mouth gently, and contact a poison centre with the product nearby. Do not make the child vomit. A small lick is often less concerning than a mouthful, but the product, amount, and child's symptoms still matter.

Can smelling nail polish make you sick?

A brief smell during ordinary use may cause temporary irritation or headache, especially in someone sensitive to odors. Concentrated fumes in an enclosed area can cause more serious dizziness, confusion, nausea, or breathing problems. Move to fresh air and seek advice if symptoms do not improve promptly.

Is nail polish remover the same kind of poisoning?

No. Nail polish remover often contains acetone, ethyl acetate, or other solvents in different concentrations. Its risks and treatment may differ. Tell the poison centre the exact product rather than describing it only as a nail product.

Should I make myself vomit after swallowing nail polish?

No. Vomiting can pull solvent-containing liquid into the lungs, where it may cause inflammation and breathing problems. Contact a poison centre for instructions based on the product and amount.

Can nail polish poisoning cause permanent damage?

Permanent damage is unlikely after a minor accidental exposure. It is more possible after severe poisoning or repeated concentrated inhalation. Lasting problems may involve the brain, nerves, hearing, liver, kidneys, or lungs.

Do I need medical care if I feel better after fresh air?

Not always. A mild headache or irritation that fully clears after brief accidental exposure may not need emergency care. Contact a poison centre if the exposure was deliberate, prolonged, involved a child swallowing polish, or caused marked drowsiness, confusion, vomiting, chest symptoms, or breathing difficulty.

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