

Nail Assessment

A nail assessment consists of observing the nail shape, consistency, color and capillary refill. Check the index finger at its profile to determine nail clubbing. A healthy nail may have a nail angle of around 160 degrees. The nail should be free from indentations and splitting. Check the nail attachment to the nail bed by applying pressure to the nail. The nail should be translucent and pink. Observe for nail cyanosis and brown linear streaks (in fair-skinned individuals), as they may indicate underlying disease. Lastly, check capillary refill by placing the index or middle finger at heart level and press the nail edge for 5 seconds, or until blanching. Color should return back to the nail after 1-2 seconds.



PLAY PICMONIC

Observe the Nails

View Index Finger at its Profile

Index-card Finger at its Profile

Viewing the nail at its profile will show indications of nail clubbing. Patients with pulmonary disease, congenital cyanotic heart disease and lung cancer may display nail clubbing. Examine the angle at the nail's base, it should be around 160 degrees. Nails can vary and certain individuals may have normal curved nails, so it is important to note the angle between the nail base and nail for an accurate analysis. A sign of early clubbing is when the angle straightens to 180 degrees, or becomes flat from nail base distally.

Look at Consistency

All Nails Look Consistently the Same

The nail surface is expectedly smooth and regular. The nail should be firmly attached to the nail bed when pressure is applied. It should not be splitting or brittle. Examine the nail edges and they are expectedly smooth, rounded and clean. Grooves, indentations may indicate nutrient deficiencies. Thickened, ridged nails indicate arterial insufficiency, and a spongy nail base may be associated with nail clubbing.

Observe Color

Colors

The nail is expectedly translucent with an even pink nail bed. Observe nails for cyanosis. White linear markings are sometimes present and result from nail trauma. Dark-skinned people may have brown-black pigment areas, or linear bands/streaks along the nail edge. The sudden appearance of brown linear streaks in light-skinned people may be a sign of melanoma.

Check Capillary Refill

Caterpillar

Check the capillary refill by using the index or middle fingertip. Place the finger at heart level and press the nail edge for at least 5 seconds to blanch the nail, then release. Normal color should return immediately or within a few seconds if the patient's hands are cold. Cap refill is usually 1-2 seconds. Also inspect the toe nails the same way. Slow color return can indicate septic shock, respiratory or cardiovascular dysfunction.