Nailing down a diagnosis
By
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Onychomadesis is the spontaneous, complete shedding of the nail from its proximal side, without pain or inflammation, following nail matrix arrest.

This 5-year-old boy is rambunctious. He explores the exam room nonstop, while his mother voices her concerns.

"It's his fingernails," she says. "Two weeks ago I noticed that he seemed to be losing them. I thought he might have developed a fungal infection. It started on one or two fingers, but now it's spread to nearly all of them."

I reach for the otoscope and look at the little boy's hands. Under good lighting with magnification I can appreciate the separation of the proximal nail from the nail bed on several of the boy's fingers. It almost appears as though the nails had been traumatized and were in process of separating and sluffing off. Healthy new nails are regenerating from the matrices beneath the cuticles.

"Does he bite his nails?" I ask the mother.

"He puts his fingers in his mouth, but he doesn't chew on them."

"And you first noticed this process 2 weeks ago? Had he been ill at the time?"

"Just before that he had a bout of that hand-foot-and-mouth disease. It started with a high fever for 2 days, and then he broke out with the rash around his mouth and on his hands and feet. The fever broke, but it took over 2 weeks for the rash to go away."

"So the rash subsided, and then less than a week later you noticed the changes in his fingernails?"

"That's about right," the mother says. "Do you think the two are related?"

"I think there's a very good chance they are," I say. "Sometimes an illness with fever will temporarily interfere with the growth of the nails. You haven't noticed anything on his toenails?"
I pull off the boy's shoes and socks. A small pile of sand falls out onto the exam table. "It looks like you brought the sandbox from the playground with you," I say, as I examine his toes. Each nail appears normal.

"The toenails are unaffected," I muse.

Quickly, I examine the boy's throat, neck, chest and abdomen. Everything appears to be normal.

"You don't think it's a fungal infection?" the mother asks.

I shake my head. "It really doesn't look fungal," I say. "And it would be so unusual for a fungal infection to spread so rapidly to nearly all of his nails."

"What should we do for it?" the mother asks.

"There's no treatment," I say. "The new nails will grow out on their own, but it will take 8 to 10 weeks."

"And if they don't?"

"They will. But you can always come back and see us if you need to."

Later, I perform an online search and discover that there have been other reports of onychomadesis subsequent to Coxsackie viral infections.

Somehow I feel as though I've been a medical explorer on the cusp of a new discovery -- a heady rush to have nailed the diagnosis.

**Reference:**

Onychomadesis associated with mouth, hand and foot disease