

Prevention.

Researchers Say This Simple Hack Could Stop Your Nail-Biting Habit

You can try this technique at home, too.



BY KORIN MILLER PUBLISHED: AUG 3, 2023



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- *Nail biting is a common habit that's difficult to break.*
- *New research finds that certain repetitive movements may help.*
- *Researchers say this trick may be effective for breaking a nail biting habit, along with cognitive behavioral therapy.*

Up to 30% of people bite their nails, and it's a bad habit that's been linked with stress and anxiety. But nail biting is also a notoriously tricky habit to break, often requiring therapy to help people stop. Now, a new study has found there's a simple hack that can help the process of treating a nail-biting habit—and it's something that everyone can do on their own.

The study, which was published in *JAMA Dermatology*, recruited 268 people between the ages of 18 and 80 who had body-focused repetitive behaviors (BFRBs), including nail-biting, lip and cheek biting, skin-picking, and trichotillomania (hair-pulling). Half of the group was given a manual that described a habit replacement technique that involved gently touching their skin; The other half was told they were on a waitlist for a program that would teach them this technique.

After six weeks, the researchers found that 54% of people in the habit replacement technique group said that their BFRBs had improved. By comparison, just 20% of people in the control group saw the same improvements. Overall, people who were nail biters had the biggest odds of success.

The researchers concluded that their study “tentatively demonstrates that habit replacement is a feasible and effective self-help strategy against BFRBs, especially for nail biting.”

But...why? And how does this technique work, exactly? Here's what you need to know.

Why do people bite their nails?

To understand why this hack may help, it's important to go over why people bite their nails (and pick their skin or pull their hair) in the first place.

“Nail biting and skin picking are very common,” says New York-based dermatologist Gary Goldenberg, M.D. “Many patients admit to doing either or both, especially during periods of high stress and anxiety.”

Most people with a nail-biting habit start during childhood, and it's usually a coping mechanism to deal with stress, nerves, anxiety, or boredom, says Thea Gallagher, Psy.D., a clinical assistant professor of psychology at NYU Langone Health and cohost of the *Mind in View* podcast. But while many people outgrow a nail biting, others may develop a severe, uncontrollable nail biting habit—and this is one of the most common BFRBs, UCLA Health says.

“It's often a self-soothing behavior,” Gallagher says. “It has a function and purpose, and can often distract you from something stressful in your life.”

Why might touching your skin help with nail biting?

The hack essentially is trying to replace one habit that involves the use of your hands with another, Gallagher says. “It's trying to rewire your brain to do something that can be self-soothing but not self-harming as well,” she says. “I've had patients use things like acupuncture rings or fidget toys to help give them something positive to do with their hands that isn't going to cause damage down the road.”

The idea of replacing one habit with another has “long been part of many comprehensive cognitive-behavioral approaches to behavioral and habit change,” says Ashley Arens, Ph.D., a psychologist and clinical assistant professor at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. “Many people find success in habit change when they increase awareness of the unwanted behavior, recognize when urges to engage in the behavior arise, and commit to engaging in a competing or alternative behavior instead of the unwanted behavior,” she says.

Unfortunately, if it's left unchecked, nail biting can lead to a slew of potential issues. “It can cause long-term, low-grade inflammation of the nail matrix,” Dr. Goldenberg says. “This can lead to nail deformities and even scarring.” You can also develop an infection under or around the nail, he says.

BFRBs like nail biting can also have an aspect of pleasure, Gallagher says. “It can end up feeling good or your body looks forward to it,” she says. “Some people may get a bump in dopamine because they're excited for the experience but also the function and purpose it serves—distracting you from something stressful in life.” Gently stroking your skin may help replace some aspect of that, Gallagher says.

Some variations of the hack have people cover their fingers—and that can help, says Lily Brown, Ph.D., director at the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety in Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. “Any behavior that creates a physical barrier to the habit is likely to be helpful,” she says.

How does this hack work?

At baseline, the hack involves stroking your skin, but the researchers came up with several variations that people can try. Those include gently circling your index and middle fingers, softly tapping your middle and index fingers against your thumb, stroking your forearms, and circling your fingertips on the palm of your hand.

The researchers stress in the study that their hack is unlikely to help stop a nail-biting habit as well as cognitive behavioral therapy, the gold-standard for treating BFRBs. However, they say that it could help people who are waiting for an appointment with a mental health care provider or to serve as an additional treatment for people in between appointments.

What to do if you’re struggling with nail biting

There are a few different things you can try, both from a mental health and physical perspective, if you’re struggling with breaking a nail-biting habit. The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) recommends doing the following:

Keep your nails short to provide less of a space to bite.

- Use bitter-tasting nail polish on your nails.
- Get regular manicures to incentivize you to bite your nails less.
- Replace the nail-biting habit with a good habit, like playing with a stress ball.
- Identify your triggers and try to avoid them.
- Try to gradually stop biting your nails, like avoiding certain nails and then building from there.

“As with any habit, behavioral modification is difficult and can take a long time to work,” Dr. Goldenberg says. “Nail biting is often a compulsive behavior for patients,” says Joshua Zeichner, M.D., director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital. “This is a behavior that they know they shouldn’t be doing but can’t stop. I often refer patients to psychiatrists and psychologists for help.”

Some people may be able to break their nail biting habit from trying the above tricks, as well as a habit replacement technique like the one from the study, Arens says. “However, others may need a more comprehensive treatment approach to fully address all aspects—situational, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—that may be related to the bad habit,” she says.

If you’re struggling with biting your nails and haven’t been able to stop, Gallagher recommends reaching out to a mental health care provider. They should be able to help you find a personalized treatment plan that works for you.