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Put Your Foot Down For a Clean Pedicure

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July 2, 2002

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Today's Newsday

If you think summer sandals require manicured toes, you may want to consider this before you sit down for your next pedicure: Whirlpool footbaths, when not properly disinfected after each use, are a breeding ground for bacteria that can cause serious skin infections, especially if you've just shaved your legs.

According to a report published in a recent issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, 110 customers at a Watsonville, Calif., nail salon developed multiple boils and skin ulcers after they softened their feet, ankles and calves in a whirlpool that harbored the microbe mycobacterium fortuitum. In many cases, the bacteria were resistant to antibiotics and left permanent scars. The cases occurred in May 2001.

California investigators traced the skin infections to whirlpool baths that were not properly cleaned. "The regulations that existed at the time were inadequate," said Dr. Kevin L. Winthrop, a medical epidemiologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who is assigned to California. While most states require that foot spa basins be rinsed and disinfected after each client, Winthrop says there were no specific regulations requiring the removal of and cleaning behind a filter that traps hair and skin while water is circulated through the footbath. "When we took off the screen, we found large amounts of debris, and that's where we found large amounts of mycobacterium. Clearly the area behind the screen had never been cleaned out before. No one knew you needed to."

Since then, California has changed its regulations, and other states have followed suit. So far, there have been no reports of similar incidents in New York, where the regulations include cleaning, rinsing and disinfecting finger bowls and footbaths after each client use, but do not specifically mention cleaning the screen in the footbath. According to Theresa Wescott, a spokeswoman for the New York Department of State, "Our division of licensing is working with the Department of Health to look at any revisions that might be necessary, and we'll definitely take a look at California's changes, too."

Investigators acknowledge that these types of infections are rare. However, they also say that similar outbreaks have occurred across the country. "We really don't know how many are out there," Winthrop said. "Since this paper was published, I've heard about cases in other states. Clearly the awareness level has been raised, not just among salon owners and operators, but also salon-goers and physicians. Everyone who knows about these infections will be better able to prevent, diagnose and treat them."

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Phil Horvath, president of the International Chain Salon Association in Long Beach, Calif., said that such infections are rare. "Pedicure footbaths have been used for at least 20 years, and this is the first time I've heard of such a major occurrence of this nature." But he concedes, consumers can be at risk for infections if their salon doesn't follow the proper sanitation procedures. "Consumers should always be observant of the sanitation standards at the salons they visit," he said.

Debbie Doerrlamm, a New York State licensed nail technician in Ronkonkoma, hasn't heard of any outbreaks in New York, but she says, "that doesn't mean it couldn't happen ... Everybody is at risk to a degree."

That's why people need to protect themselves. Doerrlamm, who runs two educational Web sites for beauty consumers - www.beautytech.info and www.beautytech.com - said, "The point we as a group of professionals are trying to get out is that consumers really need to be more aware of where they are going and the practices of the technicians in the salon itself."

There are several steps you can take to protect yourself.

First, check out the salon. Look for its business license, as well as the license of the technician working on you. "It should be posted," Wescott said, along with a photo ID.

Recognize that a license isn't always enough. "Most consumers think that because they walk into a licensed place of business, that it is protected," said Nancy King, a licensed nail technician and industry consultant based in Laurel, Md. Sometimes that's not the case. "Consumers need to know what is acceptable and what is not acceptable."

Look for cleanliness, she says. If the place is visibly dirty or if the tool they are about to use is not visibly clean, walk away. "The nail technician has an obligation to demonstrate to the consumer that they are providing a safe service."

Ask your salon how they clean and disinfect their machines and instruments. "What disinfectant do they use and how do they use it?" King said. "If they aren't conscious of the name and ingredients and how it should be used, they're probably not following [regulations]."

Finally, don't shave your legs before getting a pedicure. According to the report, investigators discovered that 70 percent of the customers who had become infected had done so just before their appointments. That made it easier for the bacteria to enter their skin. "Shave afterwards," Winthrop said. "That way if you are putting your legs in a contaminated footbath, you would be at lower risk."

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