

Practice Tips

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Help from your hardware store

Inspecting the feet of elderly people is extremely worthwhile and gives a good indication of the quality of their health care. Among the common and easily treated conditions are nail deformities varying from hypertrophic nails too thick for cutting to onychogryphosis or “ram’s horn” nails. In areas without podiatrists or nurses trained in foot care, family physicians must often look after these foot care problems.

Drills

Nail conditions can be conservatively managed with widely available, hand-held electric drills (**Figure 1**). These can be fitted with a variety of heads, among which the cone-shaped grinding stone and the drum rotary sander are the most useful.

Procedure

With patients seated comfortably with their feet on a firm surface under good illumination, deformed nails can be safely burred down without discomfort. Drill speeds can be increased from 5000 to 35000 revolutions per minute, but lower speeds are usually satisfactory.

Because the deeper layers of the nail are often more friable, care must be taken not to remove too much nail and expose the sensitive nail bed. Nails can be sculpted to a satisfactory shape in a few minutes, and the procedure will not need to be repeated for many months.

Operators should wear a face mask because a considerable amount of fine dust is created and flies off the drill at high speed. This powder can

be sent for culture if a fungal organism is thought to be present.

Drill heads should be cleaned after use and can be soaked in hydrogen peroxide. I have found this procedure pleases patients and saves them from more aggressive treatments. Total nail bed ablation (Zadik’s procedure) and phenolization of the nail bed, each following total removal of the nail, are both subject to recurrence rates of up to 30%.

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I have been unable to locate literature on this topic written later than the early 1990s,¹⁻³ and I have seen no illustrations of these drills. An excellent foot care manual has been produced by the Victorian Order of Nurses.⁴

Bolt cutters

Before leaving your hardware store, consider purchasing a pair of bolt cutters (**Figure 1**),

if you practise in a coastal area with commercial fishing. These are invaluable for extracting large fishhooks and jiggers; normal wire cutters are totally inadequate for cutting off the barbs. For a total expenditure of about \$100 (electric drill, \$80 to \$90; bolt cutters, \$10 to \$20), you will have added some really serviceable tools to your office equipment. ❖

Figure 1. **Electric drill and bolt cutters:** Drill shown with cone-shaped grinding stone and drum rotary sander heads.



References

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We encourage readers to share some of their practice experience: the neat little tricks that solve difficult clinical situations. *Canadian Family Physician* pays \$50 to authors upon publication of their Practice Tips. Tips can be sent by mail to Dr Tony Reid, Scientific Editor, *Canadian Family Physician*, 2630 Skymark Ave, Mississauga, ON L4W 5A4; by fax (905) 629-0893; or by e-mail tony@cfpc.ca.

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