ONYCHOPHAGIA (NAIL BITING)

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Nail biting, or onychophagia, is considered a body-focused repetitive behavior. It is most common in adolescents and prevalence decreases with age. Onychophagia can be a nondestructive, temporary habit or it can persist and develop into a pathological, severe oral habit. The biting usually involves the nail plate, nail bed, and even cuticle. A similar disorder, onychotillomania, is the repetitive picking or manipulating of nails.

People with the compulsion to bite or pick at nails can experience feelings of unease prior to biting and relief after biting. It is commonly associated with other compulsive grooming disorders such as skin picking or trichotillomania. There is also an increased rate of other psychiatric comorbidities such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, tic disorder, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder amongst those with onychophagia. This suggests there may be a genetic component.

Complications of onychophagia include gastrointestinal infections due to the swallowing of nails, skin infections such as paronychia and onychomycosis, teeth root resorption, and temporomandibular joint dysfunction from repetitive biting. Onychophagia can also cause emotional distress and social impairment due to cosmetic concerns.

Upon diagnosis, it is important to explore for the association of other psychological disorders which the patient may be experiencing. Treating these underlying comorbidities may provide some relief and decreased nail biting.

Most children with onychophagia outgrow the behavior. However, persistent onychophagia can be managed by keeping nails short and covered, thus reducing the urge to bite. Forming a barrier between the nails and mouth as well as positive reinforcement have shown efficacy. Cognitive behavioral therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy may also be beneficial in treating this compulsive behavior. Finally there are some nail polishes sold over the counter designed for nail biters, which have a strong bitter taste that remind people not to put their fingers in their mouths.