



Understanding Vertical Nail Ridges: What Your Nails Are Telling You

Don't ignore your nail ridges.

Dr. [Tamara Santa Ana](#) DC [Dr's Substack](#)

Nov 19, 2025

Understanding Vertical Nail Ridges: What Your Nails Are Telling You

During 40 years of helping patients with nutrition and health issues, I have learned that your fingernails can reveal a great deal about what is happening inside your body. Those vertical lines running from your cuticle to the tip of your nail? They are not just a cosmetic problem - they are often your body's way of waving a red flag about your digestive health.

What Are Vertical Nail Ridges?

Think of your nails like a health diary. They grow about 3-4 millimeters each month, so what you see today reflects what was happening in your body a few months ago. Vertical ridges are those long lines that run up and down your nails, kind of like tiny speed bumps.



Vertical nail ridges - these long lines running from cuticle to tip are often your body's early warning sign of low stomach acid and poor mineral absorption.

While some skin conditions, such as psoriasis, can cause nail ridges, in my practice, the vast majority of patients I see with ridged nails have one main problem: their stomach is not producing enough acid to digest food properly.

The Real Culprit: Low Stomach Acid

Here is something that might surprise you: most people with nail ridges do not have too much stomach acid; they have too little. This condition is called hypochlorhydria (hi-po-klor-HI-dree-ah), which is simply a technical term for "low stomach acid."

Your stomach needs to be acidic - like battery acid - to break down the proteins you eat into smaller pieces called amino acids. It also requires an acidic environment to absorb essential minerals, such as iron, zinc, calcium, selenium, and magnesium. When your stomach acid is low, it is like trying to dissolve a piece of meat in water instead of acid - it just does not work very well.

Here is something that surprises most people: low stomach acid can actually *cause* heartburn and reflux, not prevent it. When your stomach produces insufficient acid, food sits there longer, fermenting and creating gas pressure. Even more important, proper acid levels keep the valve at the top of your stomach (the lower esophageal sphincter) tightly closed. Without enough acid, this valve becomes weak and floppy, allowing stomach contents to backwash into your esophagus. That burning sensation you feel? It is not from too much acid - it is from too little acid, failing to keep that valve shut tight.

I learned this vital connection from Dr. Chi at Chi Enterprises, and it completely changed how I help my patients. He teaches from his extensive background in studying patients to interpret physical signs and symptoms. When I see nail ridges, I immediately think about stomach acid problems, not just vitamin deficiencies.

Why This Matters for Your Health

When your stomach cannot properly break down proteins, your body does not get the building blocks it needs to make healthy nails, hair, skin, and even bones. Your nails are made mainly of a protein called keratin, so when protein digestion is poor, your nails suffer.

But it goes deeper than that. Poor stomach acid also means you cannot absorb minerals properly. Iron needs acid to be absorbed, which is why people with nail ridges often have an iron deficiency. The same applies to zinc, calcium, and other essential minerals.

The Family Connection: A Key Question I Always Ask

When I see a patient with nail ridges, one of the first things I ask is: "Did your mother have osteoporosis or weak bones? Do you have any known cardiac issues?" This is not a random question - there is a strong family pattern here.

Stomach acid production often runs in families. If your mom had bone problems, it might mean she spent years not absorbing calcium and other minerals properly because of low stomach acid. And

guess what? You might have inherited the same tendency toward low stomach acid. Your nail ridges could be an early warning sign that you are heading down the same path. If a man has ridges and is leaning forward, he may have more calcium in his arteries than is being replenished in his bones.

The good news is that catching this early means we can do something about it before you develop the same bone problems your mother had.

Heavy Metals: The Hidden Troublemakers

Another piece of the puzzle is heavy metal toxicity. Metals like lead, mercury, and aluminum can interfere with how your body uses the good minerals, even if you are absorbing them. It is like having someone steal your parking spot - the minerals cannot do their job because toxic metals are taking their place.

This is especially important for bone health because about 30% of your bones are made of protein (mainly collagen), not just calcium. Heavy metals can mess with both the protein part and the mineral part of your bones.

What Your Body Might Be Telling You

If you have nail ridges, you might also notice:

- Feeling bloated after eating, especially after eating meat
- Food sitting like a rock in your stomach
- Burping a lot after meals
- Heartburn (which might be from too little acid, not too much)
- Feeling tired even when you are eating “healthy”
- Hair that is not as thick as it used to be
- Brittle or weak nails

Getting Older and Stomach Acid

As we age, our stomach acid naturally decreases. By age 60, approximately 40% of people have significantly low stomach acid levels. This explains why nail ridges, bone problems, and vitamin deficiencies become more prevalent as we age.

Many older adults are also taking acid-blocking medications for heartburn, which can make the problem even worse. Sometimes what feels like “too much acid” is your stomach struggling with too little acid.

How I Help My Patients

Instead of just throwing vitamins and minerals at the problem, I focus on addressing the root cause: low stomach acid. I often recommend betaine hydrochloride (betaine HCl), which helps restore the acid your stomach needs to function correctly. I use the “Zypan” version, two tablets per meal with food. Always, ALWAYS take with food to avoid damaging the stomach lining. Always inform your healthcare practitioner if you experience any burning sensation. The dose may need to be adjusted, or we may need to repair the stomach lining.

Think of it this way: if your car will not start because the battery is dead, you don't keep turning the key harder. You fix the battery. The same principle applies to digestion - if your stomach acid is low, we need to support it first before worrying about individual vitamins and minerals.

I usually start patients on a small dose of betaine HCl with meals containing protein, then gradually adjust the dose based on their response. Most people notice improvement in digestion within a few weeks, but nail growth takes about 6 months because it takes that long to grow completely new nails.

The Bone Connection

Here is something important: your bones are not just made of calcium. Approximately 30% of your bones are composed of protein, which contributes to their flexibility and strength. Without sufficient protein building blocks from proper digestion, your bones become brittle, much like concrete without rebar.

This is why taking calcium supplements alone often doesn't maintain bone health. If you can't digest protein properly and absorb minerals because of low stomach acid, all the calcium in the world won't help.

What You Can Do

If you are seeing vertical ridges on your nails, here are some steps to consider:

Pay attention to your digestion: Notice if you feel bloated, get heartburn, or feel like food sits heavily in your stomach. These are clues about stomach acid levels.

Consider your family history: If your mom or grandmother had osteoporosis, you might be at higher risk for the same digestive issues that contributed to their bone problems.

Work with a healthcare provider: Low stomach acid and the resulting nutritional problems are best addressed with professional guidance. Digestive acid support needs to be done carefully and appropriately monitored. The most important thing to remember is to take it with food. Stop if there is burning, and go down one tablet at the next meal. Keep decreasing until there is no burning. This is your personalized dose. Some patients have had to start with six tablets and reduce the dose as their digestion improved.

Be patient with nail improvement: Remember, it takes about 6 months to grow completely new nails, so do not expect overnight changes.

Think beyond just vitamins: While vitamins are essential, addressing the underlying digestive issue is usually more effective than taking supplements alone.

Why This Approach Works

Over my 40 years in practice, I have seen this approach help thousands of patients. When we address the stomach acid problem, multiple issues often improve simultaneously - not just nail quality, but also energy levels, digestion, and overall health. And patients love it when I say that one supplement can cover a multitude of issues! Fewer pills are something everyone loves. Feeling better is even better!

The nails are like a window into your digestive health. When I see those ridges smoothing out over time, I know we are on the right track with healing the whole system, not just treating symptoms.

The Bottom Line

Your vertical nail ridges are likely not just a cosmetic issue - they may be a sign that your stomach is not producing enough acid to digest food and absorb nutrients properly. This is especially significant if your mother had bone problems, because you might be seeing early signs of the same digestive issues that led to her osteoporosis.

The good news is that when caught early and appropriately addressed, this problem is very treatable. By supporting your stomach acid production, you are not just improving your nails - you are potentially preventing years of poor nutrition that could affect your bones, energy, and overall health.

Remember, your body is constantly trying to communicate with you. Those little ridges on your nails might be the early warning system that helps you take control of your health before bigger problems develop.

Thank you for reading Dr. Tamara's Substack! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work. [Share](#)

Buy Zypan at a discount: We offer a 15% discount to Substack readers via Dr. Yoho's Substack (Surviving Healthcare) Fullscript store: <https://us.fullscript.com/welcome/yohosapocalypsestore/store-start>.

Contact: drsanta@vitalenergynutrition.com **Substack App**

© 2026 Dr Tamara Santa Ana · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)