

My hair, nails or skin are different

Introduction

Many aspects of your life can be affected after being critically ill, and this includes how your body feels and how you are eating. It may be that you find eating more difficult than before and you may feel worried or low because of your difficulties.

Often, these problems get better as you get stronger, but you may need some help or advice while this is happening. This information sheet looks at common problems around eating after critical illness and gives you tips about what may help.

This information forms part of advice on 'Nutrition and recovery after critical illness', and is a sub-section of the '[Tips to help with eating problems after Critical illness](#)' leaflet. Also see the '[Nutrition when at home](#)' and '[Nutrition in the hospital](#)' information. Nutrition is the term used to describe what you eat or drink to give you energy and other nutrients to help your body recover and stay healthy.

Having this information may help you to understand more about nutrition, how it can help your recovery and overcome any difficulties with eating after your critical illness. We hope it will help you and your family, but if you have any particular nutritional questions or worries, please ask your doctor for help or see if they can refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian is a registered health care professional who advises about nutrition for health and during illness.

You can check how healthy your current weight is for your height on the NHS website¹. There are also very good self-screening tools to use to check whether you should be worried about how your low weight or poor eating may affect your health from the Patients Association² and BAPEN³.

If you have ongoing difficulties with eating, even after this advice, if you have a low weight or are continuing to lose weight or strength, do speak to your doctor or ask to see a dietitian.

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/>

² <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=3449fca0-dc52-4f06-ac75-3050b71d7bb5>

³ <https://www.malnutritionselfscreening.org/>

My hair, nails or skin are different

It is common to have changes to your hair, nails or skin in the months after your critical illness. You might find that:

- your hair is different, or it is falling out more than usual (this is also called alopecia)
- your nails are different, such as ridged, brittle or flaky
- your skin is dry or flaky.

All this can feel a worry if you don't know that it happens after critical illness, and it can be upsetting. Your skin, nails and hair should recover in time.

Why do I have changes in my hair, nails or skin?

This can happen after critical illness because of the physical stress your body was under, emotional distress, and the medicine that you had. Hair has the second fastest growing cells in your body but during critical illness, it was not a priority for your body to grow hair or nails and skin. The effect of this is sometimes only seen a few months after your illness.

Hair changes are also more common in some medical conditions. Hair loss can be common in some families or happen because of taking some medicines such as beta-blockers, blood thinning tablets, chemotherapy, immuno-suppressants, and hormone therapy. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you are worried. Where hair loss happens due to a critical illness, it usually grows back within 6 months or a year. Hair can often grow back straighter, curlier or thinner than before.

Changes in nails and skin can also happen because of medical conditions, but like with hair, long periods of not getting enough energy or protein during a critical illness, as well as not having enough to drink can affect their growth. If you have dry or itchy skin, it can help to use a moisturiser regularly.

Can I change my diet to help my hair, nails and skin?

Generally, your hair, skin and nails will improve as you get recover from critical illness and taking medicine or vitamins won't be able to make that quicker. However, there are things you can do to make sure you have the right food and drink to give hair, nails and skin what they need. Tips are:

- A healthy balanced diet is very important to help your body grow healthy hair, nails and skin. This must include enough protein to help recovery and healing.
- B vitamins (Folate, vitamin B12, Riboflavin, Biotin, Niacin) are important for the growth of hair, nails and skin and you can get these by eating a healthy diet with different foods in it.
- Taking Biotin (vitamin B7) vitamins could help brittle nails.
- Having more iron rich foods or supplements, as well as good intake of vitamin C to help absorption, may help hair and nail health.
- Drinking enough water is important for hair, nail or skin cells to grow well.

Summary:

Changes in hair, nails and skin happen because of their growth was affected during critical illness but in time this should get better. A balanced diet will give your hair, nails and skin what they need to grow well.

More information:

British Dietetic Association Food Fact Sheet on:

- Skin health <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/skin-health.html>

This information sheet forms part of the wider Tips to help with eating problems after critical illness: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/tips-to-help-with-eating-problems-after-critical-illness.html>

Written by Louise Albrich, representing the working group from the Critical Care Specialist Group of the British Dietetic Association, UK and Catherine White, Information Manager, ICUsteps.

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