

BREAKING THE HABIT

# After 25 Years of Biting My Nails, I Think I've Finally Found a Solution

Can gel extensions cure chronic nail nibblers like me?



BY TAYLORE GLYNN

January 5, 2023



Allure

Like millions of people, I bite my nails. It's been a **chronic habit** my entire life. I'm weeks shy of turning 30 and I've tried to break it dozens of times to no avail. While **a pretty manicure** may halt my compulsion temporarily, it's never enough to deter me from nibbling away any progress I've made toward finally getting the long, healthy nails I've always wanted to have. However, during a recent manicure appointment, after I apologized yet again for the state of my torn-up nails, New York City-based nail artist **Julie Kandalec** recommended an unexpected solution that would allow my fingers to heal and my nails to grow longer and stronger: **gel nail extensions**.



Here's the deal: The shape of my nails is like a status check on the current state of my life. If you ever want to know how my week is going, the condition of my hands is a dead giveaway. The tighter the deadline, the more bloody **my cuticles**. Missed my train, making me late for **acupuncture**? There go my nails, bitten down to the quick. Even during calmer times, my fingers are an outlet for stress, contemplation, or frankly, just boredom. I can't resist a frayed edge or rough spot and I will pick and pull until they're neutralized. If a **press-on nail** starts to lift even a millimeter, I'll fiddle with it until it fully peels off. As a result, my nails and cuticles are usually damaged, weak, and uncomfortably short. Could gel extensions really help me put a stop to this endless, self-inflicted cycle?

Meet the Experts:

- **Julie Kandalec** is a New York City-based nail artist.
- **Ellen Marmur**, MD, is a New York City-based dermatologist.
- **Rachel Westbay**, MD, is a New York City board-certified dermatologist.

Sure, I understood why having a hard layer of cured gel between me and my brittle nails would prevent me from tearing them to pieces — at least while the gel was on my nails. But for most of my life, I believed the common misconception that **gel and acrylic extensions** are "suffocating" to the nails and that people who get them should give their nails "a break" from them from time to time. I can still recall that signature, searing pain of the UV light securing acrylic tips to my papery nails in high school. Why make the state of my natural nails more dire? But, according to Kandalec, who pampers the hands of stars like Selena Gomez, Jessica Chastain, and Anya Taylor-Joy, that need for a gel hiatus is simply a myth. Extensions should never be damaging as long as they're applied and **removed correctly**.

Here's the saga of how I managed to finally, after a *quarter of a century*, grow out my natural nails, thanks to a little patience, a set of gel nail extensions, and a truly brilliant nail pro.

Why Should Nail Biters Try Gel Nail Extensions?

"Safe application of these products is heavily predicated on the experience and knowledge of the applicator," **Ellen Marmur**, MD, a New York City-based dermatologist previously told *Allure*. Kandalec notes that overfiling is one common error applicators can make that can compromise nail health during the application of a new **set of extensions** or refilling them as they grow out.

"When a [natural] nail is brand new, when it's fresh, it looks really shiny, so you have to take some of that shine off to allow for the product to adhere better," she says, explaining an early step in the application process called delamination when overfiling can happen. "Overfiling comes from using too coarse a file or using it at too much of an angle. If you're filing at a 45-degree angle, you're going to get a dip in the nail. That's why you'll see those red lines; we [professionals] call them '**rings of fire**.'" Properly applied extensions can also keep current **nail damage** from worsening.

"I think having a nail enhancement on [brittle nails] does wonders honestly because it prevents them from splitting," says Kandalec, referring to both gel and acrylic tips. "Nails splitting and breaking from the nail bed is pretty common. If you have an enhancement on it prevents that, so when you take them off, [the nail has] mended itself."

During the aforementioned appointment, my nails clearly had a lot of mending to do. My cuticles were torn up as usual and I'd bitten them so extensively that I'd compromised the quick of my nail. **Rachel Westbay**, MD, a board-certified dermatologist, says that part of the finger is necessary for maintaining nail health and extensions could give them the space to recover.

"The 'quick' is an informal name for the **hyponychium**. It's located beneath the nail plate at the junction between the free edge [of the nail] and the skin of the fingertip and it forms a seal that protects the nail bed," she explains. "Extensions give length to the nail plate and thus make it more difficult to access the hyponychium with biting, allowing the area to heal." She adds that the quick isn't just important for nail health, but for **our health in general**.

"The biggest risk of cutting or biting your nails too short is infection because this damages the hyponychium, the important structure at the end of the nail that protects the nail bed from the outside world," says Dr. Westbay. "Particularly with biting, the oral cavity can introduce many organisms to the nail that are not normally supposed to be there and cause infections like paronychia. Also, because the nail bed is loaded with nerve endings, exposing the nail bed from small, incidental trauma can cause significant discomfort."

## The Gel-Extension Application and Refill Processes

I met Kandalec at her **endlessly cute atelier** for my first nail restoration appointment and to chat through the rest of our game plan, which would take about nine weeks in total. It would begin with a new set of gel extensions using **CND's Plexigel Builder**, a proprietary bonding liquid that Kandalec would shape into an extension and cure instead of applying an acrylic tip with hard gel on top. While Kandalec notes that she loves using both gel and acrylic to create extensions, gel extensions are a great option for nails prone to breaking: Since gel is more flexible, it's less likely to **lift or break**. That would be especially ideal for me because I'm prone to playing with and picking off extensions that show any sign of lifting.

Before the process.



Kandalec sculpting my extensions using forms and self-leveling gel.

"The most common consequence of prematurely pulling off gel or acrylic is a condition called **true leukonychia**, which describes the white spots on the nail plate that are the result of trauma. Fortunately, this is not permanent and resolves over time provided no further trauma occurs," says Dr. Westbay. "It can also cause onycholysis, which is a separation of the nail from the underlying nail bed. This makes the affected areas appear white, but the white is from air being allowed to enter beneath the nail. Furthermore, premature and traumatic removal can cause the nail plate to thin and dehydrate, leading to brittle, soft, and friable nails." According to Kandalec, gel extensions can also allow for more gentle application for the skin around the nail.

"Something I really love about gel is that it's self-leveling," she says, raising my hand so I could see her work. She artfully dripped the Plexigel onto the C-shaped form she had applied to each nail in order to shape it into a long, realistic extension. With every layer of gel she added, I'd watch as it settled gently into the natural arch of my nail. "If you had an acrylic [extension], you'd be filing that acrylic because it has that rough texture, which can really hurt the delicate skin around [the nail.] But with gel, because it self-levels, there's very minimal filing." After four whole hours, I left the salon with what looked like brand-new hands.

My gel extensions before polish.

The final result, four hours later.

After this initial appointment, Kandalec explained, I'd return for two to three gel refills, depending upon **how fast my nails** grew. As my real nails grew in, my extensions would grow out and I'd reach my final goal: to be left with just my long, natural nails underneath a hard gel topcoat. Having long nails obviously didn't instantly stop my oral fixation. I would still nibble on and fidget with the gel, so much so that my left index finger's extension did pop off. That, thankfully, would be the only one to do so in the next eight weeks as I returned for three more stellar manicures.

## How My Nails Look Now

Some autumnal vibes.

Reminiscent of those polished rocks you'd find at a Rainforest Cafe gift shop.

The red nail theory — ever heard of it?

Now, three months from my first appointment, the extensions are fully grown out and I can look under my hard gel polish and see my own long nails underneath. In fact, I think this is the longest they've ever been. My bad habit of biting has cooled and even my cuticles are getting some relief: Since I'm less fixated on hangnails and peeling, I pay less attention to my fingers as a whole. I had the option to keep up with hard gel on top of my nails, but I took the plunge and made an appointment at **Vanity Projects** (a vibe-y, New York City salon that specializes in hard gel application and removal) to get my remaining gel soaked off so I can change up my manicure more often. That means resisting my old ways and using strengthener to keep my nails healthy and intact, but that'll be much easier now that I can look down and see all the progress I've made. I've finally made Team Long Nails and I'd prefer not to kick myself off.

**Discover more nail stories:**

- [The Best Nail Art Trends for 2023 Are All About Illusion](#)
- [Velvet Nails Are the New Upgrade to a Glazed Donut Manicure](#)
- [This Artist Creates the Most Intricate Nail Art You've Ever Seen](#)

**Now, watch a drag queen's entire routine:**