

SELF

5 Belly Button Infections You Can Get (and What to Do if You Have One)

Read on for the ins and outs.



When you think of all the different holes on your body that can get infected, you might completely disregard your belly button. But belly button infections are absolutely a thing. You can thank the natural structure of this body part for that.

Belly buttons contain a lot of folds that allow for the buildup of dead skin cells, sweat, and various microorganisms, Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and founder of Dr. Bailey Skin Care, tells SELF. On top of that, people often neglect to wash their navels well, Dr. Bailey adds. (Or...at all.)

Like other areas of your body, your navel naturally contains bacteria and fungi. If you don't clean your belly button regularly and the circumstances are just right, microorganisms can proliferate and cause an infection, Edidiong Kaminska, M.D., a dermatologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, tells SELF. There are a few other mechanisms behind common belly button infections, too.

Here are five different belly button infections you can get, along with their symptoms.

1. A staph infection

Technically, any kind of bacteria can cause a belly button infection, Jules Lipoff, M.D., assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine, tells SELF. However, Dr. Lipoff says, the bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus* is often behind belly button infections because it tends to cause many skin infections in general.

A staph infection can manifest in a number of ways, including as a highly contagious condition called impetigo, according to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). Non-bullous impetigo can cause symptoms like itchy sores that burst and leave behind red, raw skin, along with a yellow crust, the AAD says. Then there's bullous impetigo, which can lead to fluid-filled blisters that crack open and leave crusty sores behind, the AAD says. Between the sores and the crust, the two types of impetigo have a lot of grossness in common. One main differentiator between them is that bullous impetigo doesn't tend to cause reddened skin, whereas non-bullous impetigo does, the AAD points out.

Staph skin infections can also lead to abscesses, according to the Merck Manual, which are basically warm little pockets of pus that lie underneath the skin.

It's possible to get a bacterial infection like staph in your belly button because that's just what your body decides to do that day, but getting a navel piercing is a big risk factor, Dr. Lipoff says. "[It's] the most common reason I've seen an infection in a belly button," he says.

If you're getting your belly button pierced, ask your piercer how to tell the difference between the normal healing process and potential signs of a bacterial infection. Also, follow your piercing after-care instructions diligently.

If you recently got a navel piercing and think you may have an infection (or if you think you have a belly button infection, period), you should see your dermatologist or go to an urgent care center depending on the severity of your symptoms. Your doctor can try to determine what kind of bacteria is causing the issue, then offer treatment such as antibiotics to help.

2. A strep infection

Streptococcus bacteria is another common cause of skin infections overall and belly button infections in particular, Dr. Lipoff says.

Like *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Streptococcus* can cause impetigo. It can also cause cellulitis, which usually happens when Group A streptococcal bacteria worms its way into your body through an opening in your skin such as a cut, according to the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

Cellulitis can cause a painful, red, tender, swollen rash that may blister and scab over, the U.S. National Library of Medicine says. It can also spread past your skin and affect your underlying tissues, so you may experience a fever, chills, and swollen lymph nodes. If you notice these kinds of symptoms, see a doctor ASAP for antibiotics.

3. A yeast infection

Your vagina doesn't have a monopoly on yeast infections. This kind of infection can also impact your mouth, throat, esophagus, and, as it happens, your belly button.

The medical term for this fungal infection is candidiasis, and it happens when *Candida* (yeast) that normally lives on your skin grows out of control, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says. If you happen to get this in your belly button, you'll usually notice a red rash, scaly skin, a clear discharge, itching, and burning, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine.

If you're pretty sure you have a yeast infection in your belly button, see a doctor like your primary care physician. They can recommend anti-fungal treatments to help clear things up, Dr. Bailey says.

4. An infected epidermoid cyst

An epidermoid cyst is a non-cancerous bump that can show up pretty much anywhere on your skin, including your belly button, the Mayo Clinic says. It's basically an equal opportunity offender.

Epidermoid cysts usually form when skin cells you *should* shed become stage five clingers, burrowing into your skin and growing instead, the Mayo Clinic says. This can happen when your skin is super irritated or injured in some way.

You can have an epidermoid cyst on your body with zero issues for years, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. But sometimes these cysts can rupture and become infected, the Mayo Clinic says.

If you have an infected epidermoid cyst lurking in your belly button, it will probably look red, feel painful, and may have a smelly yellow or green discharge, Dr. Kaminska says.

Four words for you: Don't. Squeeze. The. Cyst. Messing with a cyst on your own can cause scarring and further infection, according to the Mayo Clinic. Instead, see your dermatologist. They may want to drain or remove the cyst and can prescribe antibiotics to treat an infection if necessary. In the meantime, the Mayo Clinic advises putting a warm compress over the cyst to help with discomfort.

5. An infected sebaceous cyst

Sebaceous cysts are a lot like epidermoid cysts, except that they happen because of blocked oil glands or hair follicles, according to the Mayo Clinic.

As with epidermoid cysts, sometimes a sebaceous cyst is just a lump that doesn't have any uncomfortable symptoms. But if your sebaceous cyst gets infected, it can lead to redness, warmth, and a...fragrant discharge that the Cleveland Clinic describes as "cheese-like." Who's ready for a snack?

If you have a sebaceous cyst, your doctor can drain it, remove it, and offer drugs to clear the infection from your body if necessary. A warm compress can feel nice here, too.

To avoid these infections, keep your belly button clean!

While regularly cleaning your belly button isn't a guarantee it'll never get infected, it can go a long way, Dr. Kaminska says. She recommends washing your belly button with regular soap and water. If you have an innie, use a soapy finger to really dig around in all those nooks and crannies. It only takes a few seconds, and it's much quicker than eventually seeing a doctor for a belly button that's oozing something frightful.