

SHAPE

Hold Up, Should You Be Cleaning Your Belly Button Regularly?

Turns out, your navel can be a breeding ground for bacteria — and that's just *one* reason why you should be cleaning your belly button.



By **Korin Miller** | May 09, 2022



You and your belly button go *way* back, but it probably doesn't get as much attention in the shower as bigger body parts, such as your arms and legs. After all, it's the regular recipient of soapy run-off from your chest every time you wash up. So, do you really need to scrub the area, too? And if so, how should you be cleaning your belly button to ensure your outie or innie is hygienic enough?

Ahead, the answers to those questions and more need-to-know details about belly button cleaning, according to dermatologists.

What Are Belly Buttons, Anyway?

Your belly button, aka your navel, is the spot where your umbilical cord was attached before and immediately after your birth, explains board-certified dermatologist Ife J. Rodney, M.D., founding director of Eternal Dermatology Aesthetics and professor of dermatology at Howard University and George Washington University.

ICYDK, the umbilical cord carries oxygen and nutrient-rich blood to a baby from its mother in utero and carries away waste, according to the Cleveland Clinic. Once a baby is born, they no longer need the umbilical cord, so it's cut, leaving behind a short piece called a stump. Within a few weeks, the stump will naturally dry up and fall off, and, violá, the baby now has a belly button. "The make-up of the blood vessels in the cord and how it falls off determines the belly button's shape," says Dr. Rodney.

Should You Be Cleaning Your Belly Button?

"Yes, of course," says New York-based board-certified dermatologist **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, founder of Goldenberg Dermatology. "Your belly button should be cleaned just like the rest of the skin."

Whether you're the owner of an outie or innie, your belly button is home to "tiny creases, where dead skin, dirt, and bacteria can accumulate," explains Dr. Rodney. In fact, a 2012 study found that there are up to 67 different species of bacteria in the average belly button.

If you have an outie, the folds in the skin can be easier to see and clean, as they're protruding a bit more from the body. But if you have a deeper belly button (think: an innie), it's harder to spot the tiny grooves and to adequately clean out the cave with a quick run of a, say, soapy washcloth down your abdomen. "A regular shower can get some of the dirt, dead skin cells, and bacteria, but not all of it," adds Dr. Rodney. (Related: [The Crazy Thing That Happens When You Stop Showering](#))

Without getting in there and cleaning your belly button on the regular, the lingering gunk — e.g. dirt, sweat, dead skin cells, clothing fabric, and bacteria — can collect and "cause odor or even an infection," says Dr. Goldberg. It can also build up and form a belly button or navel stone, which is pretty much what it sounds like: A calcified collection of sebum (oil) and keratin (hair fibers) that looks like a stone, according to research published in the *Indian Journal of Surgery*. The longer the rock of yuck camps out in your belly button, the more likely it is to also cause an infection.

It's important to note that you don't necessarily need a cut for an infection to form in your belly button, especially if you have an innie, says Dr. Goldberg. "Moisture tends to pool there and the area becomes like a petri dish," he says. "That alone is enough to cause an infection."

How Often Should You Be Cleaning Your Belly Button?

There's no hard and fast rule for how frequently you should be cleaning your navel, but a general rule of thumb seems to be once or twice a week, says Dr. Rodney. But more is fine: A "slight, unpleasant smell" means it's time for a cleaning, he notes.

Other signs that suggest your navel needs some TLC? "Sometimes you may see dirt within the tiny folds of your belly button," she says. "[The dirt] may look white or black or a slightly different shade than your skin color."

Similarly, you might notice some "residue" (think: white-ish, brown-ish, or gray-ish gunk) on your washcloth after cleaning in and around the navel. And if you have any have itching, irritation, or redness down there, a belly button cleaning should be in order, adds Dr. Goldenberg. (See also: [Here's Why You Have Itchy Skin At Night](#))

How to Clean Your Belly Button

You actually want to approach cleaning your belly button a little differently than you do when washing the rest of your body. Here's how to properly clean your belly button, according to Dr. Rodney:

1. Moisten a cotton swab with water and mild soap.
2. Slowly and carefully move it "through the space," so that you're gently getting into the tiny creases and folds.
3. Pause and take a look at the swab: If dirty, throw it out and start fresh with a new one.
4. Repeat two or three times or until it comes out clean.

"Cleaning during or immediately after showering helps, as [showering] can get [off] the initial dirt, sebum, and debris," says Dr. Rodney.

If you have a navel piercing, consult your doctor to determine how to best clean your belly button, as you might need to follow additional instructions that are specific to your piercing, explains Dr. Rodney. Instructions will likely vary depending on how new your piercing is. "For a brand new piercing, I would recommend antibacterial soap until it's completely healed," says Dr. Goldenberg. "For a long-term piercing, regular soap and water in the shower work well."

If you're wondering if you can simplify this process, such as if it's safe to clean your belly button with alcohol, know that it's okay but not necessary, according to Dr. Goldberg. Simply cleaning your belly button with H₂O and soap is just an accessible, and safer bet. "Alcohol can irritate and dry the skin," notes Dr. Goldberg. This can cause your skin to crack and, in turn, increase the odds of developing an infection.

Of course, if you notice something is off with your navel, it's time to call your doctor. "If the area has an odor, drainage, or even just redness and irritation, it may be a sign of an infection," says Dr. Goldenberg. "Most commonly, this is a bacterial infection but I have also seen yeast infections of the umbilicus in my practice."

The bottom line on belly buttons: If you clean your belly button per the above instructions regularly, you should be just fine. And, if you've never cleaned your belly button before, then you might want to start.