

The hidden risks of not cleaning your belly button

It's easy to sail through life, semi-ignoring the fact that you have a belly button. The reality is there's usually no reason to give it a second thought. But while mentally brushing that body part aside is usually no biggie, sometimes your navel needs you, especially if it happens to get infected. Yep, belly button infections are a thing, and you can thank the natural structure of this region for that.

The folded-up little (or for some people, cavernous) hole that is your belly button can harbor lint, dead skin cells, bacteria and fungi, and other gunk. And, if your skin barrier gets broken, you can wind up with an infection, [Ife J. Rodney, MD](#), founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics, tells SELF. "A lot of people tend to pick at the skin in their [belly button](#), raising the risk of infection further," Dr. Rodney adds. On top of that, there's a good chance you might not be cleaning this area regularly, which can make the circumstances even more perfect for microorganisms to proliferate and cause an infection, Edidiong Kaminska, MD, a dermatologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, tells SELF.



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When it comes to potential health issues to worry about, belly button infections probably don't crack the top five for you.... And that's fair. But it's important to at least be aware that this can happen, especially if you start to develop issues in the area. With that in mind, here are seven 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, MD](#), a Philadelphia-based dermatologist and clinical associate professor (adjunct) at the Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University, tells SELF. However, Dr. Lipoff says, the bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*—a.k.a. staph—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. Non-bullous impetigo can cause symptoms like itchy sores that burst and leave behind red, raw skin, along with a yellow crust. Then there's bullous impetigo, which can lead to fluid-filled blisters that crack open and leave crusty sores behind. Between the sores and the crust, the two types of impetigo have a lot in common, though one main differentiator between them is that bullous impetigo doesn't tend to cause [reddened skin](#), whereas non-bullous impetigo does.

Staph skin infections can also lead to abscesses, 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 completely at random, 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, be sure to follow your piercing aftercare instructions diligently to keep the area as clean as possible.

If you recently got a 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.

Cellulitis can cause a painful, red, tender, swollen rash that may blister and scab over. 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.

3. A yeast infection

Your vagina doesn't have a monopoly on [yeast infections](#). This kind of overgrowth 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. 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.

If you think you might 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, Cynthia Bailey, MD, a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and founder of [Dr. Bailey Skin Care](#), tells SELF.

4. An infected epidermoid cyst

An epidermoid cyst is a non-cancerous bump that can show up pretty much anywhere on your skin, including inside your belly button. 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. 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, MD](#), 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. 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. 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, you can try 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.

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...smelly discharge that the Cleveland Clinic describes as "cheese-like."

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

6. Eczema complications

Eczema spares no part of your skin—even your belly button can be a target. While eczema is a chronic skin disease, not an infection, having [eczema](#) can lead to lots of scratching, which breaks the skin and gives pathogens a way in. This raises the risk of a host of complications that could impact your belly button, including both bacterial skin infections and viral infections, like warts or cold sores.

“With an eczema infection, the area may start draining pus or become red and painful,” Dr. Rodney says. “Sometimes it just feels really, really itchy—itchier than usual.” Dr. Rodney points out that you’re unlikely to just have eczema in your belly button, so noticing the rash on other areas of your skin should be a tip-off that the condition could be behind your discomfort.

7. Intertrigo

Intertrigo is another common skin condition that can lead to an infection. “It usually occurs in the folded areas of the skin, like under the [breasts](#), between the butt cheeks, and in the belly button,” Dr. Rodney says.

Intertrigo is triggered by skin-to-skin friction and, in many cases, moisture that allows bacteria and fungi to grow. This can spark an immune system response and cause a secondary infection, leading to even more issues down there.

Intertrigo usually looks like reddish or pink patches with a little scaling, but an infection can cause tender, pus-filled bumps and even a bad smell wafting from your belly button.

The best way to avoid these infections? Take care of your belly button.

While regularly cleaning your belly button won’t guarantee it’ll *never* get infected, it can go a long way, Dr. Kaminska says. She recommends

washing your belly button with mild soap and water—just during your shower will do. If you have an innie, use a soapy finger to really dig around in all those nooks and crannies.

If you've got an especially tough buildup, Dr. Rodney says you can even use a gentle exfoliating scrub. Just don't forget that this is a sensitive area, and it's important to treat it that way. "There's no need to be extra aggressive or use toothpicks or tweezers on your belly button," she says. "That raises the risk that the skin will get compromised and increases the risk of infection."

So just give your belly button a good ol' washing the next time you're in the shower or bath. It only takes a few seconds, and it's much quicker than needing to see a doctor for a belly button that's painful, itchy, and oozing.

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