

Hygiene Habits That Can Do More Harm Than Good

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Based on a Reader's Digest article citing a number of so-called "healthy" hygiene practices, I call out 10 popular personal care habits I consider to be harmful
- › There are many misconceptions about hygiene and you may be doing something you consider to be helpful – such as brushing your teeth immediately after a meal – when it, in fact, does more harm than good
- › Some examples of harmful hygiene routines are applying hand sanitizer, cleaning your ears with cotton swabs, douching and using fragrance-laced products on or near sensitive skin areas

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An article featured in Reader's Digest¹ called out a number of so-called "healthy" hygiene practices that actually do more harm than good. Given the condensed nature of their commentary and the many misconceptions involved with these particular areas of hygiene, I would like to elaborate on some of them.

You are probably aware that many commercial personal care products, such as bubble bath and hand sanitizer, are laced with harmful chemicals that can potentially damage your health.

But, what's your view on brushing your teeth right after a meal, cleaning your ears, douching or exfoliating? Are those widespread practices helping or hurting you? If you're

not sure, let's take a closer look at popular hygiene routines that may be wreaking havoc on your health. Below are 10 hygiene habits that do more harm than good.

Harmful Hygiene Habit No. 1: Applying Hand Sanitizer

If you are still under the impression hand sanitizer is as good or better for you than regular handwashing with soap and water, it's time to get educated. Many hand sanitizers contain rubbing alcohol as the active bactericidal ingredient, which may dry your skin.

Even worse is an ingredient called triclosan, which has been shown to not only contribute to the development of bacterial resistance, but it also increases the amount of bisphenol-A (BPA) you absorb when handling thermal receipt paper or other BPA-containing products.

BPA is an endocrine-disrupting chemical found in countless everyday products and it is associated with several negative health effects, including, according to Newsweek,² "interfering with proper function of hormones like estrogen. Animal studies have linked it to a number of concerning health effects, including abnormal brain function and sexual development."

Research published in PLOS One³ about the interplay of BPA, hand sanitizers and thermal receipts calls out this serious health hazard. The study authors suggested:

"Not taken into account when considering thermal paper as a source of BPA exposure is that some commonly used hand sanitizers, as well as other skincare products, contain mixtures of dermal-penetration enhancing chemicals that can increase by up to 100-fold the dermal absorption of lipophilic compounds such as BPA.

The elevated levels of BPA we observed due to holding thermal paper after using a product containing dermal-penetration enhancing chemicals have been related to an increased risk for a wide range of developmental abnormalities as well as diseases in adults."

Although the U.S. Food and Drug Administration banned triclosan in December 2017, manufacturers were given a year to stop including it in over-the-counter antiseptic products, which means you still may find products containing triclosan well beyond December 2018, especially if stores keep them on shelves until they're sold out.

Your best option for maintaining clean hands is to use a mild soap and water. As much as you can, avoid using antibacterial soap because it contributes to the growing problem of antibiotic resistance. If you really must use hand sanitizer, you'd be better off making your own. Check out the video above for more information.

Harmful Habit No. 2: Brushing Your Teeth Right After a Meal

Daily teeth brushing is one of the basics of good hygiene. A thorough twice daily brushing using light to moderate pressure for about two minutes seems to be ideal. Brushing your teeth harder or longer than necessary may do more harm than good. Unless you have a reason to brush midday, it's generally accepted that brushing once in the morning and again in the evening are sufficient. It's best to wait about 30 to 60 minutes after eating.

The reason experts recommend you wait at least 30 minutes is because brushing immediately after eating may weaken your tooth enamel. The pH level in your mouth at that time is lower and more acidic, which makes brushing more abrasive. A 2004 study published in the journal *Caries Research*⁴ found that brushing your teeth too soon after eating or drinking, particularly when consuming acidic foods and drinks like soda, accelerates dentin erosion.

Dentin is the layer below your tooth enamel. The late Dr. Howard Gamble, former president of the Academy of General Dentistry, told *The New York Times*, "With brushing [right after meals], you could actually push the acid deeper into the enamel and the dentin."⁵

Harmful Habit No. 3: Cleaning Out Your Ears With Cotton Swabs

Ear cleaning is another common hygiene habit that creates more potential harm than good. Putting cotton swabs, hair pins or other small objects into your ear canal is dangerous. Any attempt you make to swab out ear wax, shampoo or water is not worth the possible damage that may occur, which may include cuts, eardrum perforation or hearing bone dislocation.

Because your body naturally will take care of waxy buildup in your ear canal, why risk the possibility of bleeding, dizziness, hearing loss, ringing in your ears or worse? Glands in your ears produce earwax as a lubricant and protectant. It acts as a trapping agent to prevent dirt, dust and other debris from passing further into your ear canal.

You may not realize your earwax contains natural elements, including "long chain fatty acids – both saturated and unsaturated – alcohols, squalene and cholesterol."⁶ That said, it's important to recognize your attempts to expel earwax have more potential for harm than the presence of earwax itself. So, the next time you're tempted to stick something into your ear canal, take it easy and let nature run its course.

Harmful Hygiene Habit No. 4: Douching

Despite what you may read or see in advertisements, douching is not a healthy, recommended practice. Flushing your vagina with water or another cleansing agent only serves to disrupt your healthy bacteria balance, which may give bad bacteria the advantage.

Despite evidence the practice is unnecessary and potentially harmful, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) office of women's health, about 1 in 5 American women ages 15 to 44 douche.⁷ The HHS women's health team also states:⁸

"Douching can change the necessary balance of vaginal flora (bacteria that live in the vagina) and natural acidity in a healthy vagina. A healthy vagina has [both] good and harmful bacteria. The balance of bacteria helps maintain an acidic

environment. The acidic environment protects the vagina from infections or irritation.

Douching can cause an overgrowth of harmful bacteria. This can lead to a yeast infection or bacterial vaginosis. If you already have a vaginal infection, douching can push the [infection-causing] bacteria up into the uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries. This can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, a serious health problem. Douching is also linked to other health problems."

Similarly, a 2002 study published in *Epidemiologic Reviews* highlighted the negative effects of douching. The study authors stated:⁹

"The preponderance of evidence shows an association between douching and numerous adverse outcomes. Most women douche for hygienic reasons. It can be stated with present knowledge that routine douching is not necessary to maintain vaginal hygiene.

Again, the preponderance of evidence suggests that douching may be harmful. [We] believe that there is no reason to recommend that any woman douche and, furthermore, that women should be discouraged from douching."

If you douche primarily to mask the scent of vaginal odors, rest assured that most smells are natural and are affected by many factors, including your diet and reproductive cycle. If you consistently notice an offensive odor or are experiencing unusual vaginal discharge, it's time to visit your gynecologist because you may have bacterial vaginosis or a yeast infection.

Harmful Hygiene Habit No. 5: Exfoliating Too Frequently

Frequent use of exfoliating products not only can damage and dry out your skin, but also harm the environment. In the U.S., a ban on microbeads, which had been used widely in facial scrubs, body washes and even toothpaste, was signed into law in 2015.¹⁰

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), manufacturers have until July 2019 to completely phase microbeads out of cosmetics.

These tiny beads, which are nothing more than tiny bits of plastic, pose a huge risk to the environment mainly because they are so small. Given their size, they can easily travel down your drain, through your local wastewater treatment plant and straight into waterways.

Because they resemble fish eggs, microbeads are eaten by various forms of marine life, including fish, plankton, seabirds and whales.¹¹ If you're concerned about giving up microbeads, there are far safer, natural options that will leave your skin glowing without exposing it to dangerous parabens and other chemical contaminants.

Dry skin brushing, for instance, removes dead dry skin, improves the appearance of your skin, clears clogged pores and allows your skin to "breathe." You can also make a homemade exfoliant for your face and skin simply by combining a natural abrasive, such as salt, sugar or coffee grounds, with a carrier oil such as coconut oil. If you have normal or combination skin, you should exfoliate two to three times a week. Once a week is sufficient if you have sensitive skin.

Harmful Hygiene Habit No. 6: Linger in a Long, Hot Shower

Besides being a drain on precious natural resources, taking a long, hot shower is extremely drying to your skin. If you shower with unfiltered water, you are inviting all manner of harmful chemicals into your skin pores, which open naturally in hot water.

A better strategy is to shower in water that is warm, not hot, and move through your cleansing routine in straightforward fashion. Standing for a long time in a hot shower will not only encourage dry skin, but you may also risk becoming overheated and lightheaded. Fainting in a hot shower is an ugly business and could be potentially life-threatening. So, when it comes to showers, I recommend you:

- Install a shower or whole-house water filter
- Turn down the heat
- Wash your body with mild soap; shampoo as needed

- Rinse
- Get out

By avoiding long, hot showers, your skin will thank you, particularly during wintertime when dry skin is common. By the way, if you suffer from dry skin, you can slather on coconut oil after your shower to seal in moisture and eliminate dry, itchy flakes. You may want to take a shower before bedtime to help you relax and prepare to sleep.

Harmful Hygiene Habit No. 7: Moisturizing Too Much

Similar to allowing your skin to dry out, moisturizing it too often with over-the-counter skin care products can also do harm. The best way to promote and maintain radiant, healthy skin that is supple and moisturized is to:

- Apply coconut oil to your skin as needed
- Avoid processed foods and sugar
- Drink more water
- Eat fermented foods and organic vegetables
- Maximize your omega-3 level

You may also want to try skin brushing. Not only does dry skin brushing get rid of dry skin flakes, it is a powerful detoxification tool as well – helping your body eliminate toxins and waste products via your lymph nodes. Some of the purported benefits of dry skin brushing include:

Acts as a stress reliever	Exfoliates your skin
Feels invigorating	Improves digestion and kidney function
Increases circulation	Reduces cellulite
Stimulates your lymphatic system	

Harmful Habit No. 8: Coughing or Sneezing Into Your Hand

To stop the spread of bacteria and viruses from coughing and sneezing, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)¹² recommends you use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose, then discard the tissue and wash your hands. A second option they suggest is to cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow, taking care to avoid contact with your hands or lower arm.

If using your hands is your only option, be sure to avoid touching anything and wash your hands immediately after an outbreak of coughing or sneezing. By the way, if you feel a sneeze on the way at an awkward time when it may be disruptive, there are a couple of tricks you can use to stop it without causing physical harm.

"Rubbing the nose, breathing forcefully through the nose and pressing on the upper lip below the nose may relieve the urge to sneeze, but once the sneeze starts, it is usually best to just let it go," says Dr. Alan Wild, pediatric otolaryngologist and assistant professor in the department of otolaryngology - head and neck surgery, Saint Louis University School of Medicine.¹³

Harmful Habit No. 9: Spritzing Fragrance Into Your Underwear

It seems obvious that spraying body spray, cologne or perfume directly onto your genitals would be unwise, but you should also take note that spraying your underwear is equally problematic. Applying personal care products in such a sensitive area may interfere with your body's natural pH, resulting in bacterial vaginosis, a rash, skin irritation, a urinary tract infection or yeast infection.

As you may imagine, the pain and smell associated with those conditions will undoubtedly be as, or more, unpleasant than the bodily odors you were trying to mask in the first place. Your No. 1 method for ensuring the cleanliness of your genitals, as well as the rest of your body, is using mild soap and water. Beyond that, I suggest you make peace with your body's natural odors and bring any particularly offensive ones to your doctor's attention.

If you are in the habit of using talcum powder, be advised it has been linked to lung damage and lung cancer, as well as ovarian cancer.¹⁴ Although all talcum products including baby, body and facial powders have been required by law to be asbestos-free since the 1970s, I recommend you avoid using talcum powder due to the potential health risks.

Harmful Habit No. 10: Taking Bubble Baths or Using Bath Bombs

Similar to the hygiene habit of spraying scented products into your underwear, soaking in scented suds can irritate your skin and disrupt your body's pH. If you are looking for a safe and healthy bath routine, you can simply add one-half cup of Epsom salt to your bathwater. Another option is to combine one-half cup of Epsom salt with a few drops of one or more calming essential oils, such as chamomile, frankincense or lavender.

Whatever you do, never add essential oils directly to bathwater because the essential oils will sit on top of the water where they will make undiluted contact with your skin.¹⁵ This potentially can cause a hot burning sensation and painful skin rash. To avoid skin irritation, it's always best to mix essential oils with Epsom salt or to use a carrier oil. Rodale's Organic Life shares this recipe for a relaxation bath, which may help relieve stress while promoting a more restful sleep:¹⁶

Relaxation Bath

Ingredients

- 5 drops lavender essential oil
- 4 drops German or Roman chamomile essential oil
- 3 drops frankincense essential oil

Procedure

1. Combine the essential oils with 1 tablespoon of a carrier oil, such as coconut or jojoba oil
2. Add the mixture to your bathwater after you turn off the water
3. Use your hand to gently blend the mixture into the bathwater
4. Enter the bath and enjoy a time of soothing relaxation

Final Thoughts About Hygiene Habits

When it comes to matters of health and hygiene, it is important you balance your personal preferences with medically sound advice. If you've been duped by one or more of these so-called "healthy" hygiene habits, now is the time to make a change. You can take steps now to eliminate any potentially harmful aspects of your daily personal-care routine. Choose one area and get started today!

Sources and References

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