

Here's Why You Don't Need to Shower With Soap



Photo: Getty Images

Most of us think of germs as ‘dirty’—and dangerous. But as you’ve probably heard, you’re crawling with bugs, and these microbes are crucial for digestion, skin health, and immunity. People now know to take it easy on antibiotics and eat lots of fermented foods, but our squeaky-clean lifestyle is still a big problem, says Robynne Chutkan, MD, the founder of the Digestive Center for Women in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and author of *The Microbiome Solution* (\$16, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)).

Why? Regular contact with dirt and grime teaches your microbiome how to recognize friendly germs versus foes, Dr. Chutkan explains. She gave us some tips for swapping out our super clean lifestyle for one that’s filled with more bugs.

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First things first, what’s wrong with soap?

There's a role for the occasional bar of soap when we're particularly grubby, but a mild soap made from organic ingredients, rather than anti-bacterial soaps that are often full of harsh chemicals, is definitely the way to go. By scouring ourselves in the shower every day, we are actually stripping our skin of bacteria that keep us acne- and eczema-free. Unless you've just finished a Mud Run, the only places that need daily soaping are your armpits and groin. The rest of your body does fine with a rinse—even after a sweaty workout.

Dirt doesn't cause disease—but repeatedly killing off the good bacteria on our skin may actually harm our immunity. Think about that the next time you swap a little bit of dirt for some body wash.

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What is one thing that most people do in terms of cleanliness that is unnecessary?

Harsh hand sanitizers! Unless you've been hanging out on an Ebola ward, the vast majority of microbes on your skin and hands are not virulent germs that cause serious infection; they're harmless bacteria that won't hurt you.

Even during cold and flu season?

Yes, you should take a *bit* more precaution when your co-workers are coughing and sneezing non-stop. But you still don't need anti-bacterial soaps and cleansers; those work against bacteria, and the common cold and flu is caused by a virus. All that's necessary during cold and flu season is regularly washing hands with all-natural soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. This dislodges viruses and bacteria, so they wash down the drain, whereas antibacterial soaps expose you to antibiotics you don't need in your life.

What are some other ways we can “live dirty” in our everyday lives?

Like I said before, rinse with just water in the tub or shower, and skip the antibacterial soaps and shampoos. Also, spending just one day on a farm can better your microbiome. So volunteer at a community garden, or simply sit in the grass at the park. Even little things can do a lot over time. Open a window in your house or car to let some good microbes in. Buy food from the farmer's market that you know is grown in real soil, rather than produced in a factory. Try to keep in mind that in general, soil-derived microbes are good!

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This interview has been edited and condensed.