

# The Right Way to Shower According to Experts

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Too-frequent showering and shampooing can dry your skin and hair – as will many soaps
- › Personal care products with phthalates, parabens or triclosan should be avoided
- › People frequently overclean parts of their bodies while under-cleaning others
- › Water conservation can be part of your shower practices – helping the environment

Taking a daily shower is a fairly recent development for Americans. Just 100 years ago, many thought getting their whole body wet at once (instead of taking the sponge baths that were common then) would invite diseases like pneumonia and someone would "catch their death."

Nowadays, a long, hot shower is a daily ritual for Many Americans. Most soaps and personal care products have surfactants that, when combined with water, bind to oil and remove the beneficial fats called sebum that naturally protect your skin.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, the more a product bubbles or lathers, the more surfactants it contains. Many people spend money to buy expensive lotions to restore or replenish the natural skin oils they remove when they shower.

The irony is that most of the skin lotions people buy to use after they shower are far inferior to your skin's own "lotion" – sebum. Worse, most are loaded with toxic ingredients that pose risks to your health.

Taking showers that are too long or too hot can also dry your skin – as will not drying yourself with a towel as soon as you emerge from the shower. (There is one exception to the rule: If you live in a very hot or damp environment, let your body "air dry" and the water drops evaporate without a towel to cool you off.)

Cold water may also dry out your skin and there is no evidence that it has any therapeutic benefits for your skin barrier,<sup>2</sup> although there may be benefits on a deeper level from exposure to cold temperatures.

## **Beware of These Chemicals**

There are toxins you want to avoid in your soaps, shampoos and other personal care products – antibiotics. When antibacterial dish, body and laundry soaps emerged in the 2000s, they were sold as "new and improved" products to get you "better than clean."

However, the products, still widely sold, do not get you cleaner than soap and water but do expose you to the endocrine-disrupting effects of antibiotics like triclosan, found in popular dish detergents and toothpastes.

Antibiotic resistance and the creation of "superbugs" is also driven by the wide use of these antibacterial products.

In 2016, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gave industry a year to remove antibiotics from personal care products unless manufacturers can prove they are "both safe for long-term daily use and more effective than plain soap and water in preventing illness and the spread of certain infections."<sup>3</sup>

## **All Body Parts Should Not Be Washed Equally**

Soaping your skin can be counterproductive, as we have seen, since it removes the balance of beneficial bacteria and dries your skin. However, you certainly want to wash areas that have a high density of sweat glands and can produce odors – notably your groin area, buttocks and armpits.

But even when it comes to washing your genitalia, experts warn about excess soap. Here is what writer and Harvard-educated anthropologist Leslie Turnbull of *The Week* says:<sup>4</sup>

*"The external genitalia of both men and women need to be cleaned ... However, given the sensitivities of these areas, this is best done with the hand, not a cloth ... and, believe it or not, the water of the shower is probably all you need.*

*If you feel you really need to use your surfactant-free soap on your groin and (for guys) testicles and (ladies) external labia, then whatever you do ... keep that soap away from the areas where your outside turns into your inside.*

*Both urologists and gynecologists agree; soap in these places is as unnecessary and potentially harmful as soap in the eye. Both genders should clean their external genitals front to back, finishing with the perianal area. As with every other part of the body, rinse well both front and back."*

## **Does Shower 'Runoff' Clean Your Feet?**

There is another irony. While people generally overly soap their skin, they may actually neglect their feet. Many Americans are guilty of "mistakenly thinking the runoff from cleaning the rest of them will somehow remove the dirt, bacteria and dead skin from this critical part of the body," says Turnbull.<sup>5</sup> The top and bottom of your feet and between your toes may need to be washed separately.

Though it may not clean your feet, there is a benefit to the shower runoff for people who are prone to developing ingrown toenails.

After the shower when your skin and nails are soft, the toenail that tends to "ingrow" can be lifted up by gently going underneath its edge with your fingernail — discouraging it from growing into your skin. Certainly, preventing an ingrown toenail is preferable to treating it.

Sometimes, people who are otherwise thorough washers can also neglect their ears, says Turnbull. Use your index finger to lightly clean the external folds of your ears and the oft-forgotten area behind your ears with gentle shampoo or plain water.

## **Shampoo in the Shower? Don't Make These Mistakes**

Many people wash their hair in the shower daily or every other day. As with showering, there's growing recognition that perhaps we've become too clean with these practices.

Like overcleansed skin, hair can be dried out by shampoo and can move people to use conditioners to try to replenish the natural oils that are lost, which, like skin's natural oils, are immensely preferable to external lotions that are applied.

Ironically, the less you wash your hair, the less it needs washing: Frequently shampooing actually makes hair more oily – and when you shampoo less, you “train” your hair to become less oily.

In addition to drying out hair, most commercial hair products contain toxic chemicals that operate as endocrine disruptors including sodium lauryl sulfate, phthalates used for fragrance, and methylisothiazolinone (MIT) and parabens, used as preservatives.

Neither bath soap nor shampoo should be synthetically scented because a pleasant aroma is not worth exposure to these chemicals. A slight hint of lavender or citrus derived from essential oils is safe but, if you're unsure, look for hair products whose labels say "fragrance free."

## **Have You Heard of the 'No-Poo' Movement?**

In reaction to excessive harsh shampooing, a “no-poo” has developed that advocates abstaining from shampoo altogether in favor of baking soda, vinegar or even applying conditioner to use as a “shampoo.”

If you're thinking of switching over to baking soda and vinegar, be aware, though, that many people say their hair initially felt grimy and unclean before it ultimately got better.

Though we have all heard the instructions "lather, rinse, repeat" for decades, almost no experts actually recommend a second shampooing. Sometimes "lather, rinse, repeat" is necessary in a salon after chemical treatments, say experts, but is seldom necessary in the everyday world.<sup>6</sup>

Applying conditioner after you shampoo is more important on your hair's ends than your scalp because the ends are much farther away from your scalp's oil and will be drier.

Dr. Karyn Grossman, a dermatologist in Beverly Hills, California, recommends slapping "conditioner on the ends of your hair — generally, more for thick hair and less for thinner strands — to let it sink in."<sup>7</sup> She told Greatist:<sup>8</sup>

*"The warm, wet environment works magic: Follicles open up, letting the conditioner sink in extra deep and making it more effective than if you had rinsed off immediately ... Wait until the end of your shower, and then use a comb to detangle hair."*

Like shampooing, both men and women often like to shave in the shower because it is convenient and skin is softened. Turnbull suggests:<sup>9</sup>

*"If you shave in the shower, always keep a clean razor on hand. Dry it out between uses. Consider investing in a good shaving mirror if you shave your face and/or a shower bench if you shave your legs. These can make the process of shaving in the shower infinitely easier and even safer."*

## **Water Is a Precious Resource To Be Conserved**

With droughts occurring in many parts of the U.S. and world, we can't act like water is an unlimited resource. A 10-minute shower can use up to 50 gallons of water — about 5 gallons are used a minute. For this reason, experts suggest turning the water off while

you are shaving – especially since most people want to take their time and be careful with a blade, which could expend a lot of unnecessary water.

A lot of water is also misused in waiting for the shower to reach its desired warm temperature. That is why some conscientious people place 5-gallon buckets under their shower head while the water is warming to use later for watering plants, rinsing clothing or even flushing the toilet.<sup>10</sup>

Speaking of the toilet, some people urinate in the shower, which is not as unsanitary as it sounds since urine is sterile unless there is infection present.<sup>11</sup> While some may find the idea of relieving themselves in the shower unpleasant, it is a habit that does conserve water because 27% of the water used in American homes comes from toilet flushing.<sup>12</sup>

Even the humidity and warmth in the bathroom after taking a shower can be conserved by keeping the door and windows closed. This will soften your skin and let moisture sink in while you are dressing and grooming, say experts.

But there is one caution when it comes to humidity: It can degrade the potency and composition of any medicines you have stored there (and, if left overly humid, the moisture could contribute to mold growth). Increasingly, pharmacists tell people to keep their medicines anywhere but in the bathroom!

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1, 2</sup> [Huffington Post January 29, 2014](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [Opednews September 4, 2016](#)
- <sup>4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11</sup> [The Week May 19, 2015](#)
- <sup>7, 8</sup> [Greatist.com December 15, 2015](#)
- <sup>12</sup> [U.S. EPA, Indoor Water Use in the U.S.](#)