Are washcloths and other body scrubbers bacteria factories? [1]

Alice,

My question is about the cleanliness of loofahs and other body scrubbers. Since they usually hang out in the shower where there is constant warmth and moisture, wouldn't they grow bacteria? How often should they (scrubbers) be changed or how do you clean them? The reason I ask is that I am experiencing some hives, and the only thing I can think that is causing it might be the scrubber gloves in my shower.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your suspicion as to the cause of your hives might be right. Natural (such as loofah, a cucumber-like vegetable) or synthetic sponges, cotton washcloths, and other "body scrubbers," as you called them, can certainly harbor and breed bacteria when left in warm, moist environments, such as bathrooms. These bacteria can cause skin conditions, such as folliculitis, an inflammation of the hair follicles brought about by infection.

Proper care of body scrubbers can help limit or discourage bacterial growth to numbers sufficient enough to cause disease, or in your case, a skin rash, including:

- Rinsing the body scrubber thoroughly after each use.
- Allowing time for the body scrubber to dry completely between uses (natural materials take longer to dry than synthetic ones).
- Storing the body scrubber in a dry, well-ventilated area to facilitate drying, such as away from the tub or shower area and near an open window or fan.
- Disinfecting the body scrubber every few days by soaking it in a dilute bleach solution (for synthetics, \( \frac{3}{4} \) cup of bleach per gallon of warm water; for natural fibers, \( \frac{1}{4} \) cup of bleach per gallon of cool water) for at least 5 minutes.
- Adding the body scrubber to your wash and/or dishes every time you run these machines.
- Zapping the body scrubber (with no metal components) in the microwave, just until steaming, to sterilize it? for at least 30 seconds when dry, and for 1 to up to 3 minutes when wet.
- Replacing the body scrubber with a new one every few weeks or monthly.
As for your skin, trash your current pair of scrubber gloves and start using a new body scrubber, keeping the above guidelines in mind. Apply an antiseptic cleanser to the affected area of skin until the condition clears up and the hives go away. If your rash does not improve or actually worsens, make an appointment with a dermatologist, who will diagnose what you have and prescribe appropriate treatment.

Alice!

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