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 sponges (such as loofahs, cucumber-like vegetables), 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.

Studies have shown that loofah sponges and similar beauty products promote the growth and colonization of a range of microbial organisms. Specifically, loofahs are designed to be very porous and therefore, have lots of nooks and crannies in which dead cells can get stuck. This, coupled with the fact that they're in a wet environment and constantly moist, creates an ideal breeding ground for many microbial organisms. Similarly, towels that are reused several times before being washed become additional reservoirs for microbial colonization. Staphylococcus, which is the cause of many types of skin rashes, has been shown to survive for up to 21 days on cotton fabrics!

However, it probably isn't necessary to go throwing out all your loofahs and cotton towels just yet. Here are some tips to care for your loofah and you:

- **Dry it daily.** Rinse your loofah very well after use. Shake it out thoroughly and hang it in a cool place where it has the best chance of drying out.
- **Avoid using it for a few days after you shave.** Bacteria can enter your skin through any sort of nick or cut, so it's best not to use your loofah for a couple of days after shaving your
legs.

- **Avoid using it on your face or in your genital area.** Those parts of the body are sensitive to infection.
- **Clean it weekly.** To do so, soak it in a diluted bleach solution for five minutes and then rinse thoroughly.
- **Replace it regularly.** If you have a natural loofah, it's best to replace it every three to four weeks. Plastic ones usually last for two months and are less likely to grow unwanted microbes. If they develop an odor or start looking gross, replace them.

In addition, washcloths may be a good alternative to loofahs since their physical structure makes them less susceptible to bacteria and microbes lodging in them. They're also easier to clean and dry. People tend to wash them with their laundry and replace them more frequently as well.

As for your skin, it may be time to start fresh and invest in a new body scrubber, with the above guidelines in mind. If your rash doesn't improve or actually worsens, you may find it helpful to make an appointment with a dermatologist (a specialist who focuses on the skin) or health care provider, who may be able to assess the situation and recommend appropriate treatment.

Scrub-a-dub-dub!

Alice!

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