Shower water and bacteria? [1]

Alice,

My cousin's biology teacher told her class that the water we shower in is not hot enough to actually kill bacteria but it promotes bacteria to grow through its warmth. He said it is best to take as cool a shower as one can stand. Is this true?

?Freaked about bacteria

Answer

Dear Freaked about bacteria,

Before giving hot water the cold shoulder, let's take a closer look at the source of those offending germs. It's not clear where you are concerned about the bacteria growing? on your body, the water, the shower, or elsewhere? In one sense, your cousin's biology teacher is correct ? the water temperature used for showering is not hot enough to kill bacteria. Fortunately, it's not necessary to kill bacteria when bathing; soap and water is all you need to wash away germs and send bacteria running (er, swirling?) down the drain.

Here are some hygiene tips to keep body odor and bacteria at bay during your shower:

- **Stay warm.** Contrary to the advice of your cousin's biology teacher, cold water is not as effective as hot water for removing dirt and bacteria.
- **Lather up.** Soapy water washes away body oil, which holds bacteria on your skin.
- **Scrub-a-dub-dub.** Try using a washcloth or loofah sponge to rub off dead skin and germs.
- **Be wary of antibacterial soap.** Antimicrobials do kill germs, but they may also create "super germs" that antibiotics cannot fight.

If you're concerned about bacteria in the water itself, you'll be happy to know that almost all U.S. municipalities use a chlorination process to disinfect the public water supply, virtually eliminating any disease-causing organisms in the water. Despite this vigilance, some bacteria do survive. Being sprayed in the face with bacteria may seem gross, but most of these tiny organisms are quite harmless, and many are actually good for us!

Water bugs notwithstanding, the actual shower stall or tub is a prime site for bacteria growth. Consider this advice to keep your shower spic and span:

- **Clean or replace the shower curtain often.** Soap scum on the curtain can be home to
a bustling community of microorganisms.

- **Run the water**, just for half a minute before you hop in the shower. Bacteria like to congregate in the showerhead, so running the water flushes out some of the germs.
- **Upgrade to a metal showerhead**. Plastic spouts are more hospitable to bacteria.
- **Scrub the tub**. Pick your cleaning agent of choice and scrub the scum out of your tub regularly.

It is a little freaky to think of bacteria taking over your shower. Fear not though, your immune system offers good protection against all kinds of germs. However, folks with compromised immune systems should be particularly careful that the bathroom is kept in tip top shape. In most cases, comfortably warm (not scalding) soapy water is enough to keep your body fresh and clean and dozens of cleaning products are available for sanitizing your shower.
If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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