

Rub hands together until thoroughly contaminated.



# You're Doing It Wrong

11 ways you may be sabotaging your health—when you think you're saving it

BY PAIGE GREENFIELD  
PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAIRE BENOIST

Some tasks in life are so mind-numbingly simple that you don't even think twice about them. You're essentially on autopilot, feet up in the cockpit, content in the knowledge that you'd have to *try* to screw these things up.

Or would you? What if you've actually been botching things you thought you had mastered long ago? Take flossing: Couldn't be easier, right? You're probably doing it wrong. And if you aren't, well, then we'll bet you don't know how to dry your hands. Or apply sunscreen. Or slip on a condom. Yes, we mean stuff *that* simple.

The point is not to make you feel stupid but to help you do something smart. In other words, we want to help you take hold of the controls before you crash. "Making small corrections to the things you're already doing can have a major impact on your overall health," says Ted Epperly, M.D., the *Men's Health* family medicine advisor. Now about that condom . . .

Prop styling: Angela Campos/Stockland Market



## Putting on a condom

**MISTAKE**  
Leaving air in the condom's tip

The banana-condom demos clearly aren't cutting it. According to a 2012 Kinsey Institute review, men tend to make one of two condom mistakes: They either forget to leave space for their semen to collect at the condom's tip, or if they do leave a little room in their rubber, they fail to squeeze out the air. Both of these boners can increase your risk of breakage. So what's the proper technique for gloving up? "To leave space *and* remove the air, use your thumb and forefinger to squeeze the tip as you're rolling the condom down all the way to the base of your penis," says study author Robin Milhausen, Ph.D.



## Applying sunscreen

**MISTAKE**  
Washing your hands afterward

This is one time you *don't* want to wash your hands. If you suds up after slathering on sunscreen, you leave a crucial surface exposed to harmful UV rays. "I frequently see accelerated aging on the hands because people forget to apply sunscreen there," says Northwestern University dermatologist Amy Derick, M.D. Apply about as much sunscreen to your hands as you would if you were moisturizing with lotion—and don't forget your nails. Yes, they're dead cells, but the tissue underneath is active and susceptible to melanoma and other skin cancers, the Skin Cancer Foundation warns.



## Sanitizing your counters

**MISTAKE**  
Assuming that all cleaners disinfect

That blue stuff you spray on your windows may be great on glass, but it's a dud as a disinfectant. Scan the label before you buy: Only cleaners labeled with an EPA registration number, such as Clorox Anywhere, are true germ killers. "If you use a cleaner that's not a disinfectant, you run the risk of not killing bacteria, spreading microbes, and contaminating more surfaces," says University of Arizona microbiologist Charles Gerba, Ph.D. Once you start cleaning, step away after you spray. "It takes 30 to 90 seconds for a disinfectant to kill germs, so let it sit before wiping it off," Gerba says.



## Taking a shower

**MISTAKE**  
Taking a shower every day

Unless you punch the clock in a sewer pipe, you're probably overdoing it. "The outermost layer of skin is essential for locking in moisture," says Dr. Derick. Frequent showers with serious scrubbing can remove the layer's oils and lipids, which help fend off dryness. Shower every day if you need to—just keep the water lukewarm and your time to 10 minutes or less, Dr. Derick says. Afterward, skip the vigorous towel-dry routine, which can also dry your skin. Instead, gently blot your body with a soft towel and smear on CeraVe, a moisturizing cream that contains skin-fortifying fatty acids, says Dr. Derick.



## Cleaning contact lenses

**MISTAKE**  
Topping off your solution

If you never changed your car's oil and only topped it off, do you know what you'd end up with? An engine full of dirty oil. Well, you're practicing the same poor maintenance with your contacts. In a University of Texas study, 90 percent of people thought using fresh solution meant simply adding a few drops to what was already in the lens case. The harm? Leftover solution is sapped of its disinfecting power, which the FDA says can raise your risk of vision-damaging infections. Your move: Clean, rinse, and air-dry the case each time you remove your lenses from it. Then refill it with fresh solution.



## Trying to make a baby

**MISTAKE**  
Using regular lubricant

You love the idea of having sex like clockwork. But for your wife, having to hook up whenever she's ovulating—horny or not—can make her wish your Big Ben would break. "Three out of four women report increased vaginal dryness when they're trying to conceive," says Ashok Agarwal, Ph.D., director of research at the Cleveland Clinic's center for reproductive medicine. Unfortunately, a lube may alter the pH of her vagina and act like a spermicide, he warns. Stick to those that say "safe for use when trying to conceive," such as Pre-Seed Personal Lubricant. This means the FDA has deemed it sperm-safe.



## Sitting on the toilet

**MISTAKE**  
Keeping knees level with hips

Even if you're a fan of fiber, you can still find yourself straining on the toilet. Most commodes are now "comfort height," which means your knees are level with your hips. This puts a crook in your rectal canal, interfering with the smooth transit of your turds. "In the natural squatting posture, with your butt below your knees, the rectal angle is straighter, minimizing straining," says Dov Sikirov, M.D., the author of an Israeli study on the topic. To help straighten your canal, try placing a 4-inch footstool under your feet. In Dr. Sikirov's study, people who did this strained less than when they sat normally on a toilet.



Illustrations by RADIO

## MISTAKE MANAGEMENT

Don't let a blunder kill your confidence.

You've just made a stupid mistake at work, but it may not be your boss's wrath you need to worry about. "People engage in harsh self-criticism thinking it will help them avoid the same error in the future," says Jeff Szymanski, Ph.D., author of *The Perfectionist's Handbook: Take Risks, Invite Criticism, and Make the Most of Your Mistakes*. "The problem is, beating yourself up doesn't tell you what to do instead." It's okay to mentally evaluate your blunders—as long as you're solution oriented. For example, instead of telling yourself, *I'm a total idiot for screwing up those reports*, make this your mantra: *I screwed up because I took on too many projects. Next time I'll delegate to Dan*. How to tell if you've truly moved on? You'll be able to talk about the mistake with others, and the thought of a repeat mishap won't freak you out, says Szymanski. —LILA BATTIS



### Battling back pain

**MISTAKE**  
Vegging out on the couch

Lounging in front of the TV for all eight seasons of *House* won't cure a bad back. "Lying down for a prolonged period of time is one of the worst things you can do for low-back pain," says Carmen Pichard-Encina, **M.D.**, an assistant professor of orthopedics at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore. "It increases stiffness in the muscles of your back. Over time, inactivity can also cause those muscles to weaken, making them even more prone to injury and pain." This doesn't mean you should exercise as normal, though. Opt for low-impact activities, such as walking or swimming, which target muscle stiffness without jolting your joints, says Dr. Pichard-Encina. That said, if even these activities are unbearable or if the pain doesn't let up in 5 to 7 days, schedule a doctor's appointment.



### Cleaning a wound

**MISTAKE**  
Using hydrogen peroxide

Bleach is a powerful disinfectant, but you don't pour the stuff on a cut, right? And yet many of us reach for a bleach called hydrogen peroxide, not realizing that while it's murder on germs, our skin also suffers. "It reduces the number of fibroblasts, a type of cell that's crucial for cleaning and repairing damaged tissue," says David Bar-Or, **M.D.**, director of trauma research at the Swedish Medical Center in Colorado and the author of a study on the perils of peroxide. Just clean the wound with soap and water and apply a petrolatum-based cream (such as Aquaphor). Then cover it with an adhesive bandage. The petrolatum creates a moist environment, which promotes the healing of minor wounds, according to researchers in Germany.



### Flossing your teeth

**MISTAKE**  
Flossing before and not after brushing

In your mind's eye you can picture the floss dislodging food particles, which brushing can then sweep away. Except for one thing: The benefits of flossing have less to do with freeing the lettuce wedged between your teeth than clearing the debris you can't see—in your mind's eye or the mirror. "Flossing is better able to remove the microscopic debris between your teeth *after* you've brushed off larger particles that were in the way," says Manhattan dentist Jennifer Jablow, **D.D.S.** After brushing, spit out the excess toothpaste, but hold off on your final rinse until you've finished flossing. Doing this can help transfer the toothpaste's fluoride into the crevices between your teeth, maximizing its germ-fighting action, says *Men's Health* dentistry advisor Kenneth Young, **D.D.S.**



### Drying your hands

**MISTAKE**  
Skipping the paper towels

Anyone who says electric hand dryers are more sanitary than paper towels is full of hot air. Rubbing your mitts under a traditional dryer can boost the number of bacteria on the surface of your skin by up to 45 percent, a recent study in the *Journal of Applied Microbiology* found. "Most dryers draw in air from the bathroom and then can expel any airborne contaminants directly onto your hands," says University of Westminster microbiologist Keith Redway, **M.Sc.** Another problem: Rubbing your hands together can stir up bacteria in your pores so they rise to the surface of your skin. Your best bet is still the paper route, which reduces microbe levels on your palms by nearly 60 percent. Don't worry about paper waste: Many facilities now use biodegradable towels made from recycled paper.

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