



Whirlpool baths: enter at your own risk

Skip the soak if you don't want millions of germs for company
[Reuters](#)

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CORRECTION: In an earlier version of this story, the terms "whirlpool baths" and "hot tubs" were incorrectly used interchangeably, whereas the relevant study looked only at whirlpool baths and not recreational spas and hot tubs.

Better think twice before soothing those aching muscles in a whirlpool bathtub. A new study shows they can be breeding grounds for a host of disease-causing bacteria.

Dr. Rita B. Moyes a microbiologist at Texas A & M University tested 43 water samples from both private and hotel whirlpool bathtubs -- the type that are "filled and drained after each use, as distinguished from recreational spas and hot tubs."

"Every tub tested had some kind of microbial growth," Moyes told Reuters Health.

"And I was just getting the few organisms I was testing for, so it is probably just the tip of the iceberg as far as what is really present. Also, I did no viral testing," she emphasized.

In 95 percent of the tubs, bacteria derived from feces were present, while 81 percent had fungi and 34 percent contained potentially deadly staphylococcus bacteria.

Moyes explained that a teaspoon of normal tap water contains about 138 bacteria and many samples are bacteria-free. A teaspoon of whirlpool tub water, on the other hand, contains an average of more than 2 million bacteria.

The interior pipes of whirlpool baths that are not filtered or chemically treated are prime areas for potentially infectious microbes to congregate and grow, Moyes noted. These organisms often form a biofilm -- a community of organisms, which work together and are more resistant to cleaners.

When the jets are switched on, the bacteria-packed water gets blown into the tub. "Due to the movement of the water, an aerosol is created that carries these organisms down into your lungs or other orifices -- something that doesn't happen in a regular tub," Moyes explained.

The bacteria found in whirlpool baths can lead to a number of diseases, including urinary tract infections, skin infections, and pneumonia.

So who is most at risk? "Of course the young and the old and the immunocompromised should not be exposed, including breathing in the aerosol from outside the tub," Moyes said.

In contrast to whirlpool bathtubs, "a chemically maintained hot tub should not be a problem to a healthy person," she added. Moyes' research is published in an online journal called PM Engineer.

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