

Prebiotics: How best to protect your skin and why daily showers may not be a good idea

Now couldn't be a weirder time to question washing. I've spent the past three years reporting on how our notions of what it means to be "clean" have evolved over time—from basic hygiene practices to elaborate rituals that involve dozens of products targeted at each of us by gender and age and "skin type." At the same time, the incidence of immune-related skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis has risen in the developed world.

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"Everyone wants to eat Activia yogurt and colonize themselves with bacteria, and then they want to use Purell," [says researcher Julie Segre.]

Venture capitalists are pouring millions into trying to change that—meaning by developing a topical probiotic that could be sold as an essential part of an everyday skin-care routine. At the same time, some of Segre's scientific colleagues are testing "bacteriotherapy" to treat existing diseases. Researchers at NIAID tried spraying eczema patients' inner elbows with the aforementioned *Roseomonas mucosa*. After six weeks of twice-weekly applications, symptoms such as redness and itching [diminished in most of the patients](#).

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The promise Segre sees at the moment is not in probiotics (which, technically, are the microbes themselves), but in prebiotics—the various products that "feed our microbial gardens." The normal and beneficial microbes are there already; we probably don't need to add them so much as promote them, she says.

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