

# The Many Uses of the Humble Alcohol Swab

Neera R. Nathan, MD, MSHS; Daniel M. O'Connor, MD; Jeffrey B. Tiger, MD

Readily available and comparatively inexpensive, the common alcohol swab can aid dermatologists in everything from diagnosis to preoperative and postoperative care. The 70% isopropyl alcohol swab can aid in the accurate diagnosis of lesions and skin conditions, identification of biopsy sites, and disinfection.

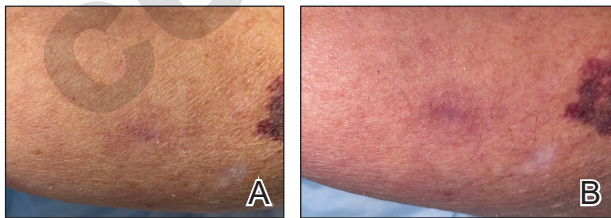
*Cutis.* 2023;113:48.

## Practice Gap

In light of inflation, rising costs of procedures, and decreased reimbursements,<sup>1</sup> there is an increased need to identify and utilize inexpensive multitasking tools that can serve the dermatologic surgeon from preoperative to postoperative care. The 70% isopropyl alcohol swab may be the dermatologist's most cost-effective and versatile surgical tool.

## The Technique

When assessing a lesion, alcohol swabs can remove scale, crust, or residue from personal care products to help reveal primary morphology. They aid in the diagnosis of porokeratosis by highlighting the cornoid lamella when used following application of gentian violet.<sup>2</sup> The alcohol swab also can lay down a liquid interface to facilitate contact dermoscopy and improve visualization while also reducing the transmission of pathogens by the dermatoscope.<sup>3</sup> Rubbing an area with an alcohol swab can induce vasodilation of scar tissue, which also may help localize a prior biopsy or surgical site (Figure).



A, An ill-defined biopsy scar on the upper arm. B, Rubbing it with an alcohol swab showed blushing, which facilitated accurate identification via dermoscopy or plain visualization.

Before a surgical site is marked, an initial cleanse with an alcohol swab serves to both remove debris and provide anti-sepsis ahead of the procedure. Additionally, the swab may improve adherence of skin markers by clearing excess lipid from the skin surface. Assessing the amount of debris and oil removed in the process can help determine a patient's baseline level of hygiene, which can aid postoperative wound care planning. In extreme cases, use of an alcohol swab may help diagnose dermatitis neglecta or terra firma-forme dermatosis by completely removing any pigmentation.<sup>4</sup>

After surgery, the alcohol swab can remove skin marker(s) and blood and prepare the site for the surgical dressing. There also is some evidence to suggest that cleansing the surgical site with an alcohol swab as part of routine postoperative wound care may decrease incidence of surgical-site infection.<sup>5</sup> At follow-up, the swab can remove crust and clean the skin before suture removal. If infection is suspected, the swab can cleanse skin before a wound culture is obtained to remove skin commensals and flora on the outer surface of the wound.

## Practice Implications

The 70% isopropyl alcohol swab can assist the dermatologist in numerous tasks related to everyday procedures. It is readily available in every clinic and costs only a few cents.

## REFERENCES

1. Pollock JR, Chen JY, Dorius DA, et al. Decreasing physician Medicare reimbursement for dermatology services. *J Am Acad Dermatol.* 2022;86:1154-1156.
2. Thomas CJ, Elston DM. Medical pearl: Gentian violet to highlight the cornoid lamella in disseminated superficial actinic porokeratosis. *J Am Acad Dermatol.* 2005;52(3 pt 1):513-514.
3. Kelly SC, Purcell SM. Prevention of nosocomial infection during dermoscopy? *Dermatol Surg.* 2006;32:552-555.
4. Blattner CM, Perry B, Snider K, et al. Clinical pearl: increasing utility of isopropyl alcohol for cutaneous dyschromia. *Cutis.* 2016;97:287;301.
5. Vogt KN, Chadi S, Parry N, et al. Daily incision cleansing with alcohol reduces the rate of surgical site infections: a pilot study. *Am Surg.* 2015;81:1182-1186.

Drs. Nathan and Tiger are from the Department of Dermatology, Lahey Health and Medical Center, Peabody, Massachusetts. Dr. O'Connor is from Dermatology and Skin Health, Dover, New Hampshire.

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Correspondence: Jeffrey B. Tiger, MD, Lahey Health and Medical Center, Peabody, One Essex Center Dr, Peabody, MA 01960 (jeffrey.b.tiger@lahey.org). doi:10.12788/cutis.0926