SOFTWARE & TECH

Do Whales Have Belly Buttons

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795582912606580

Do Whales Have Belly Buttons? The Surprising Truth About These Ocean Giants

When we picture a whale, we often imagine a smooth, streamlined giant gliding effortlessly through deep blue waters. The question **do whales have belly buttons**might seem odd at first glance. After all, belly buttons are something we associate with humans and land mammals. Yet, whales are mammals just like us, and they share many of the same biological traits, including the remnants of the umbilical cord. The short answer is yes, whales do have belly buttons, but they look quite different from what you might expect. In this article, we will explore the fascinating world of whale anatomy, the purpose of the belly button, how it forms, and why it matters for understanding these magnificent creatures.

Whales Are Mammals, Not Fish: A Crucial Distinction

To understand whether whales have belly buttons, we first need to remember that whales are marine mammals, not fish. They breathe air, are warm-blooded, give birth to live young, and nurse their offspring with milk. This means they share a common evolutionary lineage with land mammals, including humans, dogs, and dolphins. Just like any other mammal, a whale fetus develops inside its mother's womb and receives nutrients and oxygen through an umbilical cord. After birth, the cord is severed, leaving a scar that we call the belly button or navel.

Why This Matters for the Belly Button Question

Because whales are mammals, they must have a belly button at birth. The umbilical cord is essential for fetal development in all mammals, and whales are no exception. So, the real question is not **do whales have belly buttons**, but rather what happens to that scar as the whale grows and matures. Over time, the belly button in many whale species becomes nearly invisible, which is why many people assume they do not have one at all.

How Whale Belly Buttons Form: The Umbilical Connection

The process of belly button formation in whales is almost identical to that in humans. During gestation, the umbilical cord connects the developing whale calf to the placenta inside its mother. This cord contains blood vessels that deliver oxygen and nutrients while removing waste products. When the calf is born, the umbilical cord is broken or bitten off by the mother. The small stump that remains eventually dries up and falls off within a few days to a week, leaving a small scar. This scar is the whale's belly button.

Differences Between Whale and Human Belly Buttons

While the basic process is the same, the appearance and location of the belly button differ between whales and humans. In humans, the belly button is a prominent feature located in the center of the abdomen. In whales, the belly button is located on the ventral side, near the genital slit and anus, and is often just a small slit or

indentation. In many adults, it becomes so smooth and flat that it blends in with the surrounding skin. This is why even experienced whale watchers might overlook it.

Appearance of a Whale Belly Button Across Different Species

The appearance of a whale's belly button varies by species, age, and individual. In newborns, the belly button is more noticeable because the umbilical scar is fresh. In adults, it often becomes a faint, pale line or a tiny depression. Here are some examples of how the belly button looks in different whale species:

Blue Whales

The blue whale, the largest animal on Earth, has a belly button that is surprisingly small and inconspicuous. It appears as a small, smooth slit near the genital area. Given that blue whales can reach over 100 feet in length, their belly button is a mere inch or two long, making it extremely difficult to spot unless you are very close.

Humpback Whales

In humpback whales, the belly button is also subtle but can sometimes be seen as a small indentation or crease. Humpbacks are known for their acrobatic breaches, and photographers occasionally capture images that show the ventral area, including the belly button. It is often described as a small, light-colored scar.

Dolphins and Small Toothed Whales

Dolphins, which are also whales (odontocetes), have a distinct belly button that is more visible than in baleen whales. In bottlenose dolphins, for example, the belly button appears as a small, vertical slit that is clearly visible on the smooth belly. This is because dolphin skin is smoother and the navel does not become as flattened as in larger whale species.

Killer Whales (Orcas)

Orcas, the largest members of the dolphin family, have a belly button that resembles a small, pale oval or slit. In some individuals, it is quite easy to see, especially when the orca rolls onto its side. This is a common sight for marine park visitors and researchers who study these animals up close.

Why Are Whale Belly Buttons So Hard to See?

Several factors contribute to the difficulty of spotting a whale's belly button. First, whales are enormous, and their skin is thick and often covered in parasites, barnacles, or scars. Second, the belly button is located on the underside of the animal, which is not always visible when the whale is swimming. Third, in many species, the belly button becomes a smooth, flat scar that blends perfectly with the surrounding skin. Finally, whales rarely expose their bellies, and even when they do, the belly button is often hidden by the genital slit or other anatomical features.

Belly Buttons in Whales vs. Other Marine Mammals

Whales are not the only marine mammals with belly buttons. Seals, sea lions, manatees, and otters all have them as well. However, the appearance varies greatly. For example, in seals, the belly button is often a small, round scar that can be seen on the belly. In manatees, it is a distinct slit. The fact that all marine mammals have belly buttons reinforces the idea that they are indeed mammals that give live birth and nurse their young.

Common Misconceptions About Whales and Belly Buttons

Despite the scientific evidence, many people still believe that whales do not have belly buttons. This misconception likely arises from the fact that most people never get a close-up look at a whale's underside. Additionally, some people assume that because whales live in water, they must have evolved differently from

land mammals. However, evolution has not eliminated the belly button because it serves no purpose after birth and simply remains as a harmless scar. There is no evolutionary pressure to remove it entirely.

The Myth of the "Smooth Belly"

Another common myth is that whales have perfectly smooth bellies with no marks or scars. In reality, whale skin is often covered in blemishes, scars from fights or predator attacks, and even rake marks from other whales. The belly button is just one of many markings that can be found on a whale's ventral surface.

Why Studying Whale Belly Buttons Is Important for Science

You might wonder why scientists bother studying something as minor as a whale's belly button. In fact, the navel can provide valuable information about a whale's life history. For example, the shape, size, and color of the belly button can help researchers identify individual whales in some species. It can also indicate whether a whale is a newborn or has recently given birth. In captive dolphins and orcas, veterinarians often examine the belly button as part of routine health checks to ensure there are no infections or abnormalities.

Tracking Population Health

Belly button characteristics can also be used in population studies. For example, researchers can estimate calving rates by observing the presence of fresh umbilical scars in wild populations. This information is crucial for conservation efforts, especially for endangered whale species.

How Scientists Observe Whale Belly Buttons

Observing a whale's belly button in the wild is challenging but not impossible. Researchers use several methods:

- Aerial photography: Drones and aircraft can capture images of whales from above, revealing the belly area when the animal rolls or breaches.
- Boat-based observations: Researchers on boats can get close enough to see the belly button in calm waters or when the whale is swimming slowly.
- Underwater footage: Cameras mounted on underwater vehicles or attached to whales with suction cups can capture detailed images of the belly.
- Stranded animals: When whales wash ashore, scientists can examine the belly button up close during necropsies.

What Whales Can Teach Us About Evolution

The presence of a belly button in whales is a powerful reminder of their evolutionary history. Whales evolved from land-dwelling, hoofed ancestors that lived about 50 million years ago. These ancestors, such as Pakicetus, lived near water and gradually adapted to an aquatic lifestyle. Over millions of years, their bodies became more streamlined, their limbs transformed into flippers, and their nostrils moved to the top of their heads to form blowholes. However, some features, like the belly button, remained because they are not detrimental to survival. In this way, the humble belly button is a vestigial structure that tells the story of how whales returned to the sea.

Frequently Asked Questions About Whale Belly Buttons

Do all whale species have belly buttons?

Yes, all species of whales, including baleen whales and toothed whales, have belly buttons. The navel is a universal feature of all placental mammals, which includes all whale species.

Can you see a whale's belly button from a boat?

In most cases, no. The belly button is very small and located on the underside, which is rarely visible from a boat. However, if the whale breaches or rolls onto its side, it might be briefly visible.

Do male and female whales both have belly buttons?

Yes, both male and female whales have belly buttons. The navel is not related to gender; it is simply a scar from the umbilical cord that all mammals have at birth.

Is a whale's belly button the same as a human's?

Not exactly. While both are scars from the umbilical cord, a whale's belly button is typically a small slit or indentation rather than a prominent bump or cavity. It also becomes much flatter and less noticeable over time.

Does a whale's belly button have any function after birth?

No, the belly button has no function after birth. It is simply a remnant of the umbilical cord that connected the calf to its mother during gestation.

Conclusion: The Hidden Mark of Mammalian Heritage

So, **do whales have belly buttons**? Absolutely. Every whale, from the massive blue whale to the playful dolphin, is born with an umbilical cord, and the scar it leaves behind is the belly button. While it may be small, hidden, and easily overlooked, this unassuming mark is a powerful reminder that whales are mammals, just like us. It connects them to their evolutionary past and reinforces the fascinating story of life returning to the sea. The next time you see a whale breach or glide past a boat, remember that somewhere on its belly is a tiny scar that tells the story of birth, life, and the deep bonds between all mammals. It is yet another reason to marvel at these incredible ocean giants.

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