

Germs have you surrounded, but you can still fight back

by R.J. Ignelzi

Choose your weapon. Soap, hand sanitizer, bleach or using body parts other than your hands to open doors and push elevator buttons. No matter what your form of germ warfare, and how diligently you use it, you're never going to rid yourself or your environment of germs.

Trillions of germs and bacteria are everywhere. They reside on our skin and in our mouths and line our intestines. They can lurk for days on kitchen counters, computer keyboards and escalator handrails, just waiting to leap onto your unsuspecting hands.

Go ahead, have another squirt of Purell.

Despite living in a germ-infested world, we are surprisingly healthy because most of us have a remarkably efficient immune system that constantly patrols our body to prevent it from being taken over by infectious diseases.

"Our bodies do a great job of protecting us from organisms," says Dr. John Spinosa, a pathologist and chief of staff-elect at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego. "Our immune system and white blood cells filter our blood, our GI (gastrointestinal) tract filters out (harmful) organisms, the skin protects us and so do the lungs."

GERM WARFARE - Germs are all around you, but you can still fight back. CNS Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott.

Only rarely do really nasty germs have a chance to enter our bodies. And, it's even more unusual that they should invade in concentrations high enough to make us sick - usually with a cold or stomach virus.

While refusing to touch an ATM, share a phone or shake someone's hand may help reduce the number of little critters you come in contact with, it's no solution, epidemiologists say. "People are always looking for a magic pill or bullet, but we don't need any super-duper sophisticated (antidotes). Just doing basic things like washing your hands, avoiding sick people, staying home if you're sick and not touching your face, will help prevent infection and disease," says Dr. Don Herip, epidemiologist at Palomar Pomerado Health Foundation in San Diego County. Being aware of how germs are spread and making an effort to limit exposure is smart, but he cautions people not to go overboard.

"Hyper alertness (to germs) with good hygiene is a good practice to follow, but you don't want the fear of germs to interfere with your daily living," Herip says. "You shouldn't limit activities because you're afraid to open a door or use a public bathroom."

What about the notion that we can build stronger immune systems by exposing ourselves to lots of crud?

Sorry, epidemiologists say, it's an urban myth and an excuse used by bad housekeepers. Not washing your hands after you sneeze or neglecting to wash the kitchen counter will not make you more hardy. Just less healthy.

With the cold and flu season upon us, germ defense has never been more important. Test your knowledge of battling the bug.

GERM WARFARE

- The germiest place in most homes is:

A. The toilet

B. The garbage pail

C. The refrigerator door handle

D. The kitchen sink

E. The front door handle

Answer: D. According to studies, the kitchen is germ haven. Mold, yeast and more than a half dozen kinds of bacteria, some of which typically travel in feces, can often be found in the sink. Disinfect it at least once a week by spraying it with a 10 to 1 water and bleach solution. Let the disinfecting solution stand for 10 minutes and then wipe down and rinse off.

- You're standing in line at the drugstore to get a prescription filled, and you feel a sneeze coming on. You should:

A. Cover your sneeze with your hand.

B. Turn away from the other people in line.

C. Sneeze into a tissue and then dispose of it immediately.

D. Stifle it by pinching your nostrils shut.

Answer: C. The cold and influenza virus is spread through droplets that can be projected up to 3 feet away when someone coughs or sneezes. That's why it's so important to cover cough or sneeze with tissue and then throw it away immediately. If a tissue is not available, sneeze into your elbow, never your hand.

- A desk or work station can be a bacteria bacchanal. Rank the desks of the following professions from most germy to least germy:

A. Banker

B. Teacher

C. Lawyer

D. Doctor

Answer: B, A, D, C. According to a study by microbiologists at the University of Arizona (sponsored by Clorox Corp.), the germiest desk job was a teacher. A teacher's desk averaged 17,800 bacteria per square inch. All together, class, how do we spell "Ick"?

The next germiest job belongs to a banker (you've heard of the filthy rich), followed by a doctor and finally a lawyer whose desk averages a mere 900 bacteria per square inch.

- The best way to protect you and your fellow office workers from viruses and bacterial illness is:

A. Get a flu shot each year.

B. Disinfect computer keyboards, phones and desks every day.

C. Don't touch bathroom door handles.

D. Stay home if you are ill.

Answer: D. The best thing you can do for yourself and your comrades is to stay at home if you have a cold, flu or any other illness.

"It's important to stay home until you feel better. Each day (from the start of an illness), shedding of the organism is decreased. When you go back to work, be sure to practice good sanitation efforts," Herip says.

Remember, while some cold medications may help you function, they don't make you less contagious.

"Everyone wants to be needed at work, but when you go to work sick, you only end up causing more disruption because you're spreading an illness," Spinosa says.

- Ordinary soap and water kill microorganisms. True or false?

Answer: False. Soap and water don't actually kill the little critters, but they create a slippery environment so that they slide off. That's why it's so important that you rub your hands together with soap for at least 20 seconds (about as long as it takes to sing the Happy Birthday song twice), making sure to clean well between fingers and under the nails. Then rinse and dry thoroughly. Wash your hands often, especially at crucial times, including before eating or preparing food, after handling raw meat or poultry, before handling contact lenses, after using the bathroom, after sneezing or blowing your nose and after handling dirt.

Use liquid soap rather than bar soap, because bars can play host to living germs for an hour or two. This is especially important if one person has a staph infection or an open sore, says Dr. Raymond Chinn, epidemiologist at Sharp Hospital in San Diego. Because the liquid inside the bottle is never touched, it's not contaminated.

- Antibacterial washes are better than regular soap. True or false?

Answer: False, most of the time. Soaps with triclosan and other antiseptics do kill or inhibit bacteria, but the result is essentially the same as with regular soap. Studies have found no additional benefit from using these products.

In fact, using antibacterial soaps too often may interfere with and upset the skin's normal flora, which is needed to keep more undesirable bacteria from taking over, Herip says.

Antibacterial sponges and kitchen cleansers are also unnecessary. Cleanliness is the key to a healthy kitchen. An antibacterial sponge won't disinfect a sink or countertop. Plain detergent is just as effective for cleaning, and to disinfect, use a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water.

Disposable paper towels are the best bet for wiping down kitchen counters and appliances. However, if you must use a sponge or dishrag, run them through the dishwasher or washing machine at least once a week.

While antibacterial washes and cleanser aren't necessary, you can forget that theory that using them is creating some kind of a super bacteria.

"Although super bugs are a risk, they're not a reaction to antibacterial (products). Super bugs are a reaction to antibiotics, which are not the same as antibacterials," Spinoso says.

- Alcohol hand sanitizers are about as effective as soap and water. True or false.

Answer: True, most of the time. The alcohol kills most bacteria and viruses. Make sure the one you use contains at least 60 percent alcohol; less is not effective. Alcohol dries the skin, however, so you may need to follow up your hand cleansing with some soothing lotion.

And, while hand sanitizers kill germs, they don't remove dirt. In fact, dirt will actually inactivate the disinfection of the alcohol, Herip says.

"Think of hand sanitizers as being complementary to soap and water," Spinosa says. "If soap and water isn't available, then a hand sanitizer is the next best thing. But it shouldn't take the place of soap and water."

- Germs can run amok in the bathroom. Which of the following is LEAST likely to cause a germ attack?

A. Touching the toilet seat.

B. Sitting on the toilet seat.

C. Leaving your toothbrush on the counter.

D. Using the same luffa or shower puff you've been scrubbing with for the last three months.

Answer: B. Sitting on a toilet seat is rarely a problem. But, touching one? Quick, go wash your hands. Be sure to close the toilet lid before you flush to keep microbes inside the bowl from splashing as far as 20 feet onto you, counters and anything on them. To be safe, put things like your toothbrush in a cabinet. Luffas and puffs with all their damp holes are the perfect environment for bacterial growth. Let bath sponges and luffas dry between scrubs and toss out and replace puffs at least once a month.

- Rank the following workplace items from the most germ-infested to the least.

A. Computer keyboard

B. Desktop

C. Phone

D. Toilet seat

E. Water fountain handle

Answer: C, B, E, A, D. The University of Arizona study found that a desk worker's telephone had about 25,000 germs per square inch. Hello?

The least dirty place? The toilet seat with just 49 germs per square inch. You can thank the cleaning crews who disinfect those every day.

In between those extremes, from the germiest is the desktop, computer keyboard and water fountain handle.

The study advised workers to regularly wipe down the desktop, phone and keyboard with disinfectant wipes, which can eliminate 99 percent of germs. This is particularly important during cold and flu season.

- Not only is your body getting a workout at the gym, but so is your immune system. Which of the following

is a germ heavyweight?

A. Free weights

B. The locker room floor

C. Exercise mats

D. Elliptical trainer

E. All of the above

Answer: E. "With everyone sweating and shedding, and touching their nose and mouth, all of these have the potential (to host germs and bacteria)," Herip says, noting that because the environment is warm and moist, some viruses and bacteria can live on equipment and floors for weeks.

He recommends that gym goers be "extra self-conscious" and wash hands often, don't touch your mouth, nose or eyes in mouth, wear flip-flops in the shower and locker room and if you see someone sneezing all over the treadmill you're waiting to use, head for a piece of equipment on the other side of the room.

- The best way to prevent getting sick during air travel is:

A. Wear a face mask.

B. Take along your own pillow and headrest.

C. Hang a mini air purifier around your neck.

D. Don't touch your nose, eyes or mouth.

Answer: D. You do have an increased risk of catching a virus when flying, but don't blame it on the poor ventilation system or recirculating cabin air. Human proximity is the real culprit. If you get a cold or the flu after flying, it's probably because you sat near someone who was sneezing or coughing and you touched an object they recently handled and then you touched your mouth, nose or eye.

Paper or cotton masks won't protect you from infections, because most viruses and bacteria are small enough to pass through any ordinary weave.

Frequent fliers should be frequent hand washers.

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