

Where Germs Hide

According to the people he knew, Howard Hughes--the billionaire aviator, motion-picture producer and business tycoon, didn't believe germs could come from **him**, just from other people. Toward the end of his life, he lay naked in bed in darkened hotel rooms in what he considered a germ-free zone. He wore tissue boxes on his feet to protect them. And he burned his clothing if someone near him became ill. He was wrong in believing that germs only came from *other* people. Read on about some surprising ways we contact germs from the time we wake in the morning to when we go back to bed at night.

At Home: The alarm is blasting, you hit the snooze-button. Surprise, you just deposited germs on your alarm clock! Most of us cringe when someone coughs or sneezes near us. But the truth is, hands are the real germ carriers and that includes Your hands. Our hands pick up other people's germs but ***also deposit*** germs of their own, like the ones that cause colds, flus and diarrhea as well as norovirus, staph, MRSA and more.

Your clothes: You might be surprised to hear that your clothes can harbor salmonella, hepatitis and other viruses. Those germs and others can survive our laundry efforts because most of us don't wash clothes in hot water or use bleach anymore. **The solution:** Try using bleach or the hot cycle if you can. If not, run the dryer for more than 30 minutes, which can kill germs.

Your kitchen: Kitchens harbor more germs than bathrooms because of our own germs and those on raw meat and produce. The worst spots are the sink, sponge and counters. **The solution:** Clean your kitchen sink and counter frequently with disposable disinfectant wipes, especially after handling raw meat or produce. Use paper towels, instead of a sponge, to wipe your counters. Run your sponge through the dishwasher or microwave it for one to two minutes to kill germs.

Your commute: If you take the bus or subway, you are ***six times*** more likely to get sick than if you walk or drive, simply because you are coming into contact with more people and their germs. **The solution:** Use hand sanitizer or wash your hands ***with soap*** just after exiting public transit. And make that hand-washing thorough! The biggest mistake people make regarding germs, is not washing your hands long enough or well enough.

Purses: If you wash your hands thoroughly and then grab your purse or cellphone, you are probably defeating the purpose. Purses can easily be contaminated with fecal bacteria, most likely from being placed on public restroom floors. **Mobile Phones:** Cellphones can contain up to 100,000 bacteria. And because they are our constant companions — at the table, on the toilet, etc. — they are uniquely positioned to spread germs. "Viruses are a bit more mobile today than ever before because you've got mobile phones," Gerba said. **The solution:** Hang your purse on the bathroom hook rather than placing it on the floor. And never put a purse on your kitchen counter. Wipe your smartphone frequently with an *alcohol-free* antiseptic wipe.

Your workplace: **The elevator:** The ground-floor elevator button is like a petri dish of germs because everybody who uses the elevator ends up touching it. But there's something even worse. Read on! **The breakroom:** The hotspot in office buildings is usually the breakroom and usually on the coffee pot handle. Once again, where there are many people, there are many germs. Sometimes viruses are spread

between people who have never met. Studies showed that the biggest problem wasn't the restroom, but the **breakroom**. When a synthetic germ was deliberately placed in an office breakroom, it spread to most every surface in the office *within four hours*. **The Restroom:** If you want to improve your chances even more, choose the center stall, which contains fewer germs because fewer people use it. The exit door handle, another worry for contacting germs, is also pretty clean, because most people have just washed their hands. The real cesspool in a public restroom is the *floor*. **The solution:** Wash your hands as soon as you get to work after exiting the elevator. Encourage your company to have a professional cleaning service swab down the breakroom in addition to the restroom and, wash your hands thoroughly after visiting the breakroom.

Restaurants: Restaurant restrooms *are not the biggest problem*, probably because they are frequently and professionally cleaned. Surprise! *It's the menu!* One study found **185,000 bacteria on menus** in one test of restaurants in three states. You probably have about a hundred times more bacteria on that menu than you do on a typical toilet seat in the restroom. Another potential problem spot: restaurant seats, because usually staffers wipe down the tables, but maybe not the chairs!

Grocery Stores: And, there's **more germs** if you stop at the grocery store on your way home from work. E. coli bacteria can live on shopping carts from shoppers' hands, their babies' diapers, or raw meat they put in the cart. And surprisingly, fabric grocery bags may be a bigger risk, because they provide germs a direct route from the grocery store to your home. Tests have found that about half of reusable grocery bags were also contaminated with E. coli, which is associated with the fecal matter of animals and humans. **The solution:** Ask your grocery store what shopping cart sanitation measures it takes and reward stores that have a plan in place. Don't eat while you shop. Wash or sanitize your hands after shopping. Place reusable grocery bags on the floor rather than the kitchen counter while unloading. Wash your fabric grocery bags with hot water or bleach — or both.

It's never suggested to become a "Howard Hughes," but pathogens like E. coli and salmonella can be deadly. Taking the above advice seriously could help you avoid getting very ill, or?



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