

A TOUCHY SUBJECT

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Hands off!

The office environment is a hub of activity and chances are, germs may be lurking all over. We spend the bulk of our time at our various places of work, and therefore need to protect ourselves against contamination. The USA based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that up to 80% of all infections are spread by hand contact. Microorganisms enter your system through mucous membranes when you touch your nose, eyes, and mouth after touching a contaminated surface. Statistically, it is estimated that human beings touch their faces between 16 to 32 times an hour!



Hand hygiene is the single most effective way to avoid spreading infections, and to protect yourself and others.

The simple truth is that many diseases spread if we do not wash our hands properly. With the COVID-19 pandemic having wreaked havoc globally, hand hygiene has become a strong focal point; the average adult now washes and sanitises their hands at least eight times a day. However, more than one in 10 individuals still admitted to not washing their hands after using the bathroom.

Human beings touch a lot of different surfaces that hundreds of others touch unconsciously. Note that each time you touch your desk, keyboard, or telephone you pick up germs. More than 10 million bacteria are on a typical office desk; 400 times more bacteria than found on the average toilet. According to the National Health Interview Survey, influenza alone is responsible for about 200 million days of reduced productivity and 75 million days of work absence in the USA annually. Germs spread quickly from one person to the next, from stomach-churning food poisoning bacteria such as Salmonella, E. coli, Campylobacter and Staphylococcus aureus to viruses like Norovirus, colds, and flu.

Microorganisms like these do not multiply on desks or chairs without any help. Germs only move around when we do. Therefore, we are all responsible for the transfer of germs from one person to the next. Understanding what workplace surface types provide the greatest risk for disease transmission allows people to curb the spread of germs.

Office hotspots

- Elevators buttons.** Hundreds of people use elevators daily. Staphylococcus and Streptococcus are among the bacteria strains that could be contracted at the touch of a button. To protect yourself against germ-infested elevator buttons, use an elbow or knuckle instead of fingertips to push the elevator buttons. Workplaces should provide a sanitiser and/or hand wipes to ensure that people have access to immediate disinfection.
- Telephones.** Scientists note that telephones can hold more than 25 000 germs per square metre. To prevent the spread of germs when using the phone, users should wipe down handsets and keypads with sanitising wipes after using them, and periodically throughout the day.
- Cell phones.** From a microbiological point of view, one of your most prized possessions, your cell phone, may not be your friend! The average person touches their cell phone 50 times a day. We carry cell phones everywhere, even to the toilet, and they could be a breeding ground for E. coli, Staphylococcus and Streptococcus. A study titled, *Don't miss the real reasons why texting may actually be bad for your health*, found that cell phones carry 10 times more bacteria than a toilet seat. Get into the habit of wiping your phone regularly, using alcohol wipes.
- Computer keyboards.** A dirty mouse and keyboard can harbour about 7 500 germs, meaning lunch at your desk may be potentially hazardous. Shared computers are especially unsafe! Use disinfecting wipes to remove dirt, dust, and biological contaminants from keyboards. Since wet materials interfere with the functionality of keyboards, first check with your IT department for recommendations on which products to use.
- Door handles.** These are usually the most touched surfaces in the office, and chief spreaders of viruses like the Norovirus. Norovirus and other viruses, and bacteria, can also be found in faeces. They can be easily transferred to surfaces around the office if someone does not wash their hands after using the bathroom.
- Coffee cups.** It is common for coffee cup rims, handles, and lids to be multi-contaminated, even with faecal matter! A study found that up to 20% of office coffee cups harboured related bacteria from faeces. Simple rinsing may not be sufficient to eliminate your colleague's germs. Wash your cups in a dishwasher or soak them in a bleach solution.



Hotel danger zones

When booking a hotel room, remember that you are signing up to stay in a space that was previously occupied by thousand others. Granted, cleaning staff do a scrub down before the next guest checks in, but you might be surprised to learn where some of the germs hide.

With 14 to 16 rooms to clean in an eight-hour shift, hotel staff do not always get sufficient time to clean a room, linen, and appliances from top to bottom: only 30 minutes on average, or less during a busy season.

- **TV remote.** Many hands touch this device, and it is not high on the housekeeping team's extensive list of cleaning tasks. Along with the toilet and bathroom sink, the TV remote contains the highest levels of bacterial contamination.
- **Bed comforter or duvet.** Staff typically change linen between guests. However, the turnaround time for checking in new guests can be so fast that washing large comforters is impossible. When we sleep, we release body oils and shed skin flakes, which shed on the bedspread along with bacteria we might be carrying. It is estimated that hotels only wash and change bed comforters four times a year. Fold the bedspread and put it away, and do not use it during your hotel stay.
- **Drinking glasses.** You may want to wipe them down before drinking from them, especially if they are kept in the bathroom. A 2018 study published on the National Library of Medicine's website confirmed that flushing the toilet can contaminate many other nearby surfaces.
- **Ice buckets.** These might require decent cleaning too. In 2007, Condé Nast Traveler found E. coli on ice buckets it evaluated from various hotel rooms.
- **Hotel kettles.** Tests have found traces of E. coli on hotel rooms kettles. This could be due to cleaning personnel using the same cloth they use to wipe down toilets for kettles.
- **Lamp or light switches.** The same research team that discovered bacteria on TV remotes also found extreme bacterial contamination on the bedside lamp switch in many hotel rooms. Light switches, especially in the bathroom, are prone to collecting bacteria due to the many hands that touch them.

Remember, the more people touch a touchpoint, the higher its risk of cross contamination. Most importantly, always practice good hand hygiene!

