

Toilet seats often cleaner than your desk at work

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Workplaces, particularly during the cold and flu season, can be hazardous to your health, according to local and American health experts.

The average work station is a veritable bacteria cafeteria infested with more germs per square inch than the office toilet seat, a recent University of Arizona study revealed.

Research to determine germ hot zones -- areas that are prime habitats for viruses causing colds and flu -- found typical office phones and desktops, including computer keyboards and mice, have up to 25,000 bacteria per square inch compared to a mere 49 bacteria per square inch on workplace toilet seats.

The reason for the unhealthy inequity is questionable hand hygiene and eating at desks where even inconsequential crumbs and food residue can linger as a magnet for mold and an array of organisms that can cause just as many ills.

And, according to the study, toilet seats are routinely disinfected while desks and equipment rarely get a thorough cleaning.

With more than 80 per cent of infections transmitted through the environment, work desks become key transfer points, University of Arizona microbiologist Dr. Charles Gerba said. With people coughing and sneezing, work stations, phones and computer keyboards become a viral minefield where germs can live for up to three days.

Defending yourself against a legion of illness-inducing microbes dwelling on surfaces begins with common sense, York Region health services infection control team member Tara Cretney said.

"A lot of people wait until their desk feels sticky before cleaning them," she said. "You shouldn't wait until it's visible. We suggest they regularly clean their personal workspace. That's done by wiping down with a disinfectant every day. That will reduce bacteria counts."

Ms Cretney recommended desk surfaces, keyboards, computer mice, phones, drawer handles and work tools, including staplers, be sanitized daily with any readily available commercial disinfectant.

The best way to avoid food particles from becoming a haven for germs is to discontinue dining at the desk, the public health nurse said. If you must eat while laboring, clean up after yourself.

"Wipe before and after you eat and remember to clean any spills promptly," Ms Cretney said.

Protecting yourself against germ transmission is in everyone's hands, literally and figuratively.

A recent survey by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention exposed some disturbing hand hygiene trends.

One in three adults don't wash their hands after using the toilet and one in four don't wash after changing a baby's diaper. Fewer than half wash after handling pets or cleaning up after them, only one in three wash after sneezing or coughing and hardly anyone washes after handling money, a major carrier of disease germs.

"Wash your hands often and avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth," Ms Cretney said. "Hand sanitizers are an excellent alternative to hand washing. There are many different products and they're good to use when soap and water is not close by."

While advocating a good soaking with warm water and soap, Ms Cretney said hand sanitizers should be applied so the skin feels wet then rubbed into the hands until dry.

Most people simply don't clean their hands often enough or well, she said.

"Wash throughout the day, before food preparation and eating and after bathroom use and after coughing and sneezing," Ms Cretney said.

She listed a simple six-step hand washing routine.

"Wet the hands with warm water, apply soap, lather for 20 seconds, rinse, towel dry and turn the tap off with the towel," she said.

Germs are everywhere and hardy, said Dr. Gerba, a leading expert in micro-organism transfer points.

Contaminated water droplets are ejected into the air every time a toilet flushes, landing on everything in a bathroom, including toothbrushes, he said. Significant quantities of microbes float around public and private washrooms for at least two hours after each flush.

Laundry is another germ fest, the professor said.

"Basically, if you do garments in one load and handkerchiefs in the next, you're blowing your nose in what was in your underwear," Dr. Gerba said. "It's better to make underwear the last load and use chlorine bleach, which will clean both the clothes and your washing machine."

Not shy about his passion for germ study, Dr. Gerba said 20 per cent of coffee cups are oozing with fecal bacteria thanks to the sponges used to clean them.

According to Health Canada, about 25 per cent of us are felled by the flu each season and 26 per cent get flu shots.

Ms Cretney recommends getting a free flu shot as part of her general tips to staying healthy this winter.

"Stay home if you're sick, avoid those who are ill, see a health care provider when needed, get regular physical activity and maintain healthy nutrition," she said. "Manage your stress, get enough sleep and wash your hands."

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GERM HOT ZONES

The University of Arizona study identified prime common areas harboring cold and flu-causing germs and the bacteria count per square inch:

- Kitchen sink sponges and dishcloths, 7 billion;
- Kitchen faucets -- 229,000;
- Office phones -- 25,000;
- Desktops -- 21,000 and;
- Office toilet seats -- 49.

Environments most contaminated with body fluids and the percentage of their surfaces that tested positive:

- Daycare -- 46%;
- Playgrounds -- 36%;
- Bus travel -- 35%;
- Gyms -- 28%;
- Theatres -- 26%;
- Restaurants -- 14%;
- Work -- 11% and;
- Medical offices -- 10%.