

Where Germs Lurk

Play it safe in these spots at home or in public

Now that cold and flu season is in full swing, pay extra attention to germ-filled surfaces

you may be touching. Not all of them are obvious. With some help from University of Arizona microbiologist Charles Gerba, PhD, I've done some surprising comparisons to help you steer clear of viruses and bacteria throughout the year.

Kitchen sponge or toilet?

"There is more contamination in the kitchen sink than on a toilet," says Gerba. Remains of raw vegetables and meat can collect on the moist sponges that are used to clean surfaces. Sponges spread bacteria; change or sterilize them (run sponges through the dishwasher or zap a wet one in the microwave for a minute). Put the toilet lid down before flushing to prevent *E. coli* particles from spraying into the air.

The first-floor button on an elevator or the ATM keypad?

They have similar amounts of germs since both spots are rarely cleaned. The first-floor elevator button is like the *enter* button on a keyboard: It's used frequently and is a prime place to pick up cold germs. When I'm traveling or running errands, I keep an alcohol-based sanitizer handy.



The bedspread or remote control in a hotel room?

Studies show the remote is often the first thing touched by unclean hands. Even so, it's a good idea to remove the comforter, which is probably washed less frequently than hotel linens and blankets.

A grocery-cart handle or a drinking fountain?

One of Gerba's studies found that 55 percent of handles on grocery carts were contaminated with bodily fluids (like urine and saliva) and 21 percent showed traces of blood. As for public fountains, the ones at schools rank as the germiest.

Kitchen-sink drain or shower drain?

Because of the mixing of food and water, the kitchen sink has more germs than the shower drain. Microbial growth can occur in stagnant conditions too, so if a rotten-egg smell is wafting from the sink pour ¼ cup of baking soda down the drain, followed by ½ cup of vinegar and flush with hot water.

First or middle stalls in restrooms?

"Go for the first stalls because fewer people use them," says Gerba. And don't forget to wash your hands with soap, since restroom door-handles both in and out are havens for germs.

Dr. Weil Explains...

...why parabens found in skin-care products may be unhealthy.

Preservatives called parabens are widely used in personal-care products and cosmetics to prevent the growth of bacteria and mold. They're found in everything from toothpaste to shaving creams to shampoos. I'm concerned about their use because animal studies suggest they are weakly estrogenic and have raised questions about the safety of propyl, butyl, ethyl, and methyl parabens in topical items. Research shows that trace amounts of them were present in breast-cancer tissue and methylparaben may cause dermatitis. Found in moisturizers and deodorants, methylparabens have been linked to irritation—especially on skin with a cut or pimple.

Although parabens have long been used and the FDA considers them safe, I think they are dangerous. Many skin-care companies are now offering healthier alternatives such as sodium benzoate, a fruit-derived preservative. Most health-food stores carry paraben-free products. For help finding paraben-free merchandise, see safecosmetics.org.

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