

Maintenance Supplies

Restroom Germs in Unusual Places

Are we going overboard in our fear of restroom germs? Surveys continuously report that more and more Americans are afraid of getting germs from public restrooms—germs that will make them sick—than from any other place. This explains why we do not like to touch anything when we go into restrooms.

It seems we are all getting to be a bit like Howard Hughes, who has long been known for his fear of germs. A Chicago business journal reported that a man took his girlfriend out to dinner at an upscale restaurant where she excused herself to go to the ladies room. The man waited and waited for his girlfriend to return until he figured something must have happened. When he knocked on the ladies room door, his girlfriend said there were no paper towels and she would not touch the door knob with her hands. She was waiting for someone to push the door open from the other side so she could escape.

Many of our customers now believe that germs are lurking on toilet seats, faucet handles, and restroom door knobs, like attack dogs waiting to strike us. And yes, studies do find that public restrooms can be home to streptococcus, staphylococcus, E. coli, various forms of bacteria, the hepatitis A virus, as well as the virus that causes the common cold.

So, while many of these restroom germ concerns are justified, some may also be attributed to plain bathroom paranoia. If we are healthy, our immune system is working properly, and we take basic steps like washing our hands

frequently, we should be able to protect ourselves from most of the germs we may encounter.

However, to dispel our customers' fears and help cleaning professionals perform their jobs as scrupulously as possible, it is a good idea for us to know where most germs are—and where they are not.

Distributors as Restroom “Columbos”

The television series *Columbo*, starring Peter Falk as Lieutenant Columbo, a homicide detective with the Los Angeles Police Department, was one of the most popular programs of the 1970s. Columbo solved his cases through the extremely dogged and careful pursuit of all clues. Slow but determined, his disorganized nature eventually eliminated the innocent parties, which led him to the criminal and helped him solve the case.

Similarly, janitor distributors may need to become restroom “Columbos” to help our clients understand where restroom germs and bacteria hide and where they do not. For instance, most people will suspect a toilet seat is a witch's brew of germs, bacteria, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). However, studies indicate that the toilet seat is *not* a common vehicle for transmitting infections to humans. Many of the potentially harmful organisms found on a toilet seat only survive on its surface for a very short time. For transmission of infections to occur, the germs and bacteria would first need to survive and second, enter the body through a cut or sore on the buttocks, which is possible but very unlikely.

According to Dr. Abigail Salyers, president of the American Society for Microbiology, “To my knowledge, no one has [ever] acquired an STD from a toilet seat.”

Cold germs, like most other viruses that might find their way to the toilet seat, die rapidly, making them less of a threat than we often believe. Further, we must come in contact with large amounts of a particular virus or bacteria in order to become sick, according to July Daly [Robert, is this the correct spelling for her name?], a pathology professor at the University of Utah.

Although the toilet seat is ruled out as our primary restroom germ culprit, we still acknowledge that germs do find a home in public restrooms. This means we must dig a little deeper to find those surfaces, so we can locate the guilty parties and eradicate them. Fortunately, we will not have to travel very far.

Germ Hot Zones

Although large numbers of bacteria and viruses may not be on the actual toilet seat, they do appear to remain in the bowl after flushing, and even continued flushing does not necessarily remove all of them. This is because the porcelain surfaces of the bowl absorb the microorganisms, with gradual elution occurring after each flush.

“What happens is that significant droplets [of microorganisms] become airborne with each flush and settle on nearby surfaces around the stall,” says Doug Calvert, president of Cannon Hygiene Inc., manufacturers of restroom hygiene products and services. “With this happening, there is a possibility that people may acquire infections from an aerosol produced by the toilet by touching these surfaces.”

This is of special concern in ladies restrooms, where feminine hygiene receptacles are often placed in stalls right

next to toilets. “These disposal units can become coated with airborne germs and bacteria,” says Calvert. “And often cleaning professionals are unaware of how important it is to clean these disposal units carefully.”

Because of this, Calvert says new feminine hygiene disposal units are now available that are foot-pedal operated or use infrared sensors to open and shut the units. “This requires no direct touching of the unit whatsoever, which protects users’ health and prevents the possibility of cross infection,” he says.

Of course, there are plenty of other germ hot zones as well. They include:

- partition walls and partition door handles;
- bathroom sinks;
- faucet handles (toilet, urinal, and sink);
- toilet paper dispensers (if a handle must be touched);
- paper towel dispensers (if a handle must be touched);
- and
- door handles.

Relearning to Wash Our Hands

Although 95 percent of all men and women claim they wash their hands after using public restrooms, observations made by researchers indicate that only about 65 percent of them actually do. “And even if they do wash, they do it so quickly and use so little soap that it simply doesn’t do much good,” says Calvert. “Instead, they’ve got to relearn how to wash their hands and do it right.”

According to Calvert, this includes rubbing plenty of warm, soapy water over hands and fingers for 20 to 30 seconds, including under the fingernails. “The rubbing acts just like

agitation in cleaning, loosening disease-causing particles on the hands so they can be washed away,” he says. “After that, rinse the hands thoroughly and if necessary, repeat the process.”

Additionally, Calvert suggests that sensor-operated paper towel dispensers can help prevent re-infecting hands since they do not have to be touched. “Similarly, touch-free electric hand dryers are preferable, and some of the newest systems dry hands in just 12 seconds and even have HEPA filters to help remove more than 99 percent of bacteria and germs from the air that conventional hand drying systems circulate.”

Based on all of this information, we really do not have to use our shoes, knees, and elbows as touching devices when we use public restrooms. A little common sense, along with new restroom technologies, and of course thorough hand washing, should help keep us safe and prevent illness. “Jansan distributors can educate their clients that we really can co-exist safely and peacefully with germs and bacteria,” says Calvert. “We don’t need to make Howard Hughes a role model, but a fascinating eccentric, instead.”

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