



Why your gym may be making you sick

As part of the 'Hidden Germs' series, Janice Lieberman, the 'Today' show's consumer correspondent, looked at health clubs to see if they're healthy

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You do your best to stay healthy. You eat right and try to work out at a gym as often as possible. You join a health club to shed some pounds and to detox. But what if the very place where you try to get healthy is making you sick?

We decided to visit two gyms in the New York City area to see just how clean they are. And if they had germs, we wanted to know where the germs were hiding. With the help on environmental scientist Connie Morbach of [Sanit-Air](#) of Troy, Mich., we trekked to the gyms in search of germs. The health clubs were unaware of our visit. We sent Morbach into the locker room, the pool area, the yoga area and the machines to check for germs. She swabbed the areas and then sent her samples to a lab in Troy for testing.

Both gyms looked unclean. The first gym was the dirtiest. We found an intestinal type of bacteria in the showers and the sauna. If you had a cut on your foot, it's possible the bacteria could cause an infection. And if you ingested the bacteria, according to Morbach, you could get diarrhea and cramps. Morbach also detected bacteria associated with pneumonia on the tiles outside of the sauna. So it may be a really good idea to invest in flip flops!

Tired from a good workout? Drink lots of water, right? Not so fast. Bottled water may be the best way to hydrate. We found the water fountain at one gym to contain more than plain water. In one fountain, Morbach detected mold that can cause allergic reactions and bacteria that can cause lung and skin infections. She was also concerned that the water could generate airborne water droplets that if inhaled could cause lung infections.

Now we go on to the second gym. The air in the very room where deep breathing is encouraged — the yoga room — was bad, very bad. The ceiling tile contained stachybotrys, a type of mold that can produce various types of toxins that have been associated with suppression of the immune system, excessive bleeding and skin rashes. This mold can also cause respiratory problems.

Ready to be completely grossed out? (Can't say we didn't warn you.) Morbach found fecal type organisms on a bench in the locker room in one of the gym and the similar matter on the yoga mat in the other one. That kind of bacteria can cause diarrhea and vomiting. Not exactly the Zen escape you were hoping for!

Want some good news? We did find that the pool and hot tub water at both gyms were fine. So you can swim away with confidence!

After we received our test results, we contacted the [International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association](#). A spokesperson for the trade association gave us a statement: "It's important for your viewers to know that cleanliness is a two-way street and there is a need for awareness on both sides. While clubs may make cleaning products available to their customers, it is the responsibility of those individuals to make use of those tools. We also remind viewers that regular exercise is an essential part of maintaining good health. It even boosts their immune system."

Most of the bacteria and mold we found in these two gyms usually effect people with compromised immune systems or they have open cuts or wounds. Even so, we have some tips for enjoying your trip to the gym without having germs as your workout partner.

- Wash your hands. This is the best way to combat germs.
- Wipe down the area where you workout.
- Wear flip flops in the locker room and showers.
- Sit on a clean towel in the locker room (not directly on the bench).

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