

## What is Lurking in Your Bathroom?

By Stacey Lloyd

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Microscopic critters are living in your bathroom right now and can be transmitted by touching surfaces such as faucets, toilet-flushing levers, toilet seats and door knobs. E. coli, staphylococcus, streptococcus and shigella bacteria are all common bathroom dwellers — bacteria that can make you sick.

That's right.

E. coli (*Escherichia coli*) can cause severe cramps and diarrhea if your immune system is overwhelmed or weakened. Staphylococcus, which lives harmlessly on the skin surface, can cause skin infections such as abscesses when the skin is broken, and has also been known to cause lung infections, such as pneumonia, and blood infections (bacteremia) in susceptible individuals.

Streptococcus, most commonly known as the bacterium that causes strep throat, may cause fever, sore throat and swollen lymph nodes. Shigella infections have similar symptoms to E. coli — diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain, chills, fever and headaches.

### The Germiest Culprit? It's Not What You Think.

Most people believe that the toilet seat is the most contaminated site in the home; however this is just not true. Believe it or not, sinks have been found to have a higher bacterial count than any other surface in the home. This is because sinks tend to stay moist — a prerequisite for bacterial growth — and often contain plenty of microscopic organic matter (skin flakes, body oils and other tiny bits of "food") for bacteria to eat.

Given the high bacterial environment of the sink, it is important to use the correct cleaning methods and solutions. One of the most effective and least toxic methods is the use of a steam vapor cleaner to remove soil and kill germs without the need for chemicals.

Keep in mind that disinfectants are deactivated by soil, so, to properly disinfect, you will need to clean the surface *before* you apply the disinfectant. Let the germicidal solution sit on the surface for several minutes (dwell time) to ensure it kills the most germs.

### The Air in There

Another concern in the bathroom is particles that hang in the air after flushing the toilet. The particles are called aerosol. Charles Gerba (see the [Housekeeping Channel's Technical Advisory Board](#)), an environmental microbiologist at the University of Arizona, performed studies on toilet aerosol to examine what occurs when a toilet is flushed. He found that an invisible cloud of water droplets forms and travels six to eight feet, spreading bacteria to countertops, walls, ceiling, floor and any items, such as toothbrushes, in the vicinity.

Gerba discovered that the bacteria cloud lingers up to two hours after each flush of the toilet. This bacteria-ridden cloud of moisture not only contaminates the surfaces of the bathroom, it also gets

inhaled into the lungs. When bacteria are inhaled, they can cause respiratory distress, such as an asthma attack, or cause an infection to develop in the respiratory tract of vulnerable persons.

#### Germ Reduction

To reduce exposure to and the spread of bacteria when using your bathroom, you should:

- Clean the sink two to three times per week with a steam vapor, disinfectant or germicidal cleaner.
- Wash your hands after using the toilet. Use soap and warm water, and scrub the backs of your hands and between your fingers. Keep in mind that it is the friction and use of soap and running water which eliminates bacteria from your hands (or, short of soaking your hands in disinfectant solution for several minutes, you can use an instant hand sanitizer containing alcohol).
- Close the toilet lid prior to flushing.
- Leave the bathroom immediately after flushing.

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