

[close window](#)



Source: <http://www.medicinenet.com>

Health Feature

This article is from the WebMD

[Feature Archive](#)

Germs Are Everywhere -- Really

As you hit the road for summer travel, get in touch with those unsuspected surfaces that are breeding grounds for illness.

*By Sid Kirchheimer
WebMD Feature*

Reviewed By Brunilda Nazario

Besides providing a healthy renewal of mind and spirit, a summer vacation makes good antimicrobial sense, especially when you consider that typical workplace desktop has more germs than a public toilet seat.

But let's face it, when you hit the road for your weeklong escape, those kids arguing in the backseat or giant rodents posing for photos at theme parks aren't going to be your only travel companions. There are zillions of germs living on the umpteen surfaces you touch.

And they don't take a vacation, even when you do.

That could explain why 80% of infections are spread the same way: Someone touches a germ-ridden surface. Or someone infected by germ particles from a sneeze, a cough, or a touch -- gets the infectious bug onto their hands.

What's In a Touch?

"Whether germs are viral, bacterial, or fungal, some can remain active on most surfaces for several days -- no matter whether the surface is stainless steel, wood, plastic, or even the paper in a magazine," says Elaine Jong, MD, co-director of the University of Washington Travel Clinic in Seattle.P>

When you touch that surface, it's transmitted to your hands. Then if you touch your eyes or rub their nose or lips, when you eat or in any way get your fingers in contact with a mucous surface, voila ... you have infected yourself."

The best way to prevent problems, of course, is to never touch these "problem" surfaces. But that's not so easy.

"The funny thing is, what many people consider to be the germiest surfaces may not be so bad, while some of the most germ-ridden areas are not what most people expect," says University of Arizona microbiologist Charles Gerba, PhD, a leading researcher better known in the science world as "Dr. Germ."

Popular Opinion, Scientific Reality

For instance, Gerba recently completed a survey of 1,000 people -- getting their opinions of where the germs collect in full force, boosting their risk for infection, and compared those opinions to the evidence he's collected in thousands of germ samples.

"Most people consider Port-a-Potties and other public toilets to be the worst places in terms of surface germs. But in reality, they don't even come close to what you'll find on ATM machines, phone receivers, and elevator buttons," he tells WebMD. "That's because those toilets are cleaned and disinfected regularly. But when was the last time a typical phone or buttons on an ATM machine or elevators were?"

Of course, germs are everywhere -- and the key to removing them is with a regular cleaning (soap and clean water) and disinfecting. And because this one-two punch isn't done on many public surfaces, Gerba notes that some of the germiest places you'll likely encounter this summer include:

- **Picnic tables.** "They are never cleaned or disinfected and birds like to roost on them, especially on picnic tables near a pond or in the shade," says Gerba, a professor of environmental microbiology who has collected thousands of germ concentration samples for dozens of studies. "You should never eat from a picnic table, or even touch the surface, unless you have your own tablecloth."
- **Playgrounds.** "Some are even worse than picnic tables, and that's pretty bad -- and the monkey bars tend to be the very germiest place," he says. "That's because they're primarily used by small children who rarely wash their hands and run around with colds." Especially avoid tables and benches, where diaper changes are often done, he advises.
- **Airport bathrooms.** The problem isn't that airport bathrooms aren't cleaned and disinfected -- they are. "It's that so many people use the bathrooms as soon as they leave the plane that janitors just can't keep up with the influx of germs from around the world."

What may surprise you, however, is which part of airport bathrooms are the worst: "The faucet area is the dirtiest and the place that some people worry about most -- the doorknobs -- typically are cleanest," he says.

And the toilet seats? Because they lack the moisture that helps germs thrive, they have fewer germs than faucets. "My advice is to always use the end stalls, whether at the airport or any other public bathroom," says Gerba. "Most people use the middle stalls, so they tend to be the germiest." In his studies, the stall that is farthest left (as you face the stalls) has the fewest germs because it's used less than those on the right end.

- **Hotel rooms.** As a general rule, the higher the price the cleaner the room. "I did a study about seven years that found if you paid more than \$50 a night, there was a much greater chance that the room was regularly disinfected," he tells WebMD. "Rooms under \$50 weren't." But no matter the price, the single place where you'll find the most surface germs: the TV remote. "It's never cleaned," he says.

The Germ-Friendly Skies?

But what is the single germiest place posing the biggest risk of a hand-transmitted illness?

"I might have to go with airline bathrooms," says Gerba. "Before 9/11, I used to sample airplane bathrooms a lot, and I always found *E. coli* traces -- usually on the faucets and nearly 100% of the time on the door handles."

The reason: "About 50 people per flight use a toilet and if you ever tried to wash your hands in that tiny sink, you'll know it's pretty hard," he says. "To make matters worse, airplane bathrooms are rarely disinfected between flights."

Don't expect that holding it in will protect you.

"Studies show there are more germs in the air inside an airplane during daytime flights than during nighttime flights," says Jong, author of *The Travel and Tropical Medicine Handbook* and clinical professor of internal medicine at the University of Washington Medical School.

"When people walk in the aisles of a plane, it kicks up a lot of dust. Conversely, during red eye and nighttime flights, particle count goes down because there is less activity." Other germ-ridden surfaces on planes: the tray counters, seat armrests, and even magazines.

Portable Protection

That's why she and Gerba suggest that no matter what your travel destination is this summer, you should pack plenty of soap, alcohol swabs, or easy-to-use gel sanitizers.

"And use them," Jong tells WebMD. "You should wash your hands frequently and always before you prepare to eat food or touch your eyes, nose, and mouth. Personally, when I'm on a plane, I wipe the area around my seat with a gel sanitizer when I board, and also use them on my hands after I touch a strange surface. Keeping your hands clean is the best way to avoid becoming sick from these kinds of germs."

Published July 12, 2004.

SOURCES: Elaine Jong, MD, clinical professor of internal medicine, University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle; and co-director, University of Washington Travel Clinic; and author, *The Travel and Tropical Medicine Handbook*. Charles Gerba, PhD, professor of environmental microbiology, the University of Arizona, Tucson.

©1996-2005 [WebMD](#) Inc. All rights reserved.

Last Editorial Review: 1/31/2005 8:22:49 AM

© 1996-2005 MedicineNet, Inc. All rights reserved. [Copyright and Legal Disclaimer.](#)

Information on this web site is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. You should not use the information on this web site for diagnosing or treating a medical or health condition. You should carefully read all product packaging. If you have or suspect you have a medical problem, promptly contact your professional healthcare provider.

Statements and information regarding dietary supplements have not been evaluated or approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Please consult your healthcare provider before beginning any course of supplementation or treatment.

[close window](#)