



Is your workplace a bacteria cafeteria?

With the help of a germ guru, the 'Today' show's Al Roker takes a look at the bad bugs lurking around the studio

Today show

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The office can become a veritable petrie dish of virus and bacteria organisms, especially when your colleagues come to work sick or aren't diligent about washing their hands. The "Today" show's Al Roker joined microbiologist Chuck Gerba for a germ tour of his workspace and learned that it's not as clean as he thought.

Al Roker: We like to think we run a pretty clean show around here, but we found out that even we're not immune.

We've all been there — dragging ourselves into work despite feeling more than a tad under the weather. Now, there's a name for what we've been doing, it's called presenteeism.

Paul Gibson of CCH Inc., a human resources consulting firm: Presenteeism is the situation where an employee shows up for work even though they're sick. What happens in that case is the employee is not as productive as he or she usually might be, and it also may create a risk of infecting co-workers with an illness when they show up for work with something like the flu or a cold.

Roker: Whether it's chronic or contagious, one study found showing up to work sick can be a pricey problem for employers — to the tune of \$159 billion dollars a year.

The average flu lasts five to six days, but employees typically take less than two days off and bring their germs back to work with them.

Experts say it's best to stay home if you have any of the following symptoms:

- fever
- extreme fatigue
- aches or chills
- severe sore throat
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- cough with mucus and a runny nose

Working in close quarters compounds the problem, and is often the case in the newsroom here in studio 1-A each morning.

We brought in a germ guru, microbiologist Chuck Gerba, to give us the lowdown on how clean, or dirty, our workplace actually is.

Roker: Would we be surprised by how many germs there are in all these different places we live?

Chuck Gerba: You would really be surprised. Every day, you run a germ gauntlet getting to work and in your workplace. Basically, the people before [you] who were ill laid a germ minefield.

Roker: I hear you. It sounds like we're gonna explode.

Gerba: Well, no. It's sort of like germ roulette. You know, you touch the right spot at the wrong time. And you bring your fingers to your nose, your mouth or your eyes. You can pick up colds that way. Eighty percent of the infections you get you're going to pick up from your environment.

Roker: In a study funded by Clorox, Gerba found that your work area can become, as he calls it, a "bacteria cafeteria."

Gerba: We actually find more bacteria, 400 times more bacteria, on an average desktop than a toilet seat.

Roker: How is it that bathrooms are cleaner than desktops?

Gerba: Because, people don't usually clean their desktops.

Roker: And, many office workers think someone else is doing that job for them.

Rosalyn Stone of Corporate Wellness: Most people assume that office cleaning personnel clean their desks, when in fact, most offices have arrangements for their cleaning staff not to touch the desktop, because most people don't want their papers rearranged.

Roker: And there's a good chance that bacteria that can cause strep throat and pneumonia, or the viruses responsible for colds and the flu, could be lurking there.

Gerba: Don't become overly paranoid. There are always going to be germs in your office. It's knowing where the ones are that are going to make you ill.

Roker: So we sent Dr. Gerba searching for those hot spots in our studio and offices where offending microbes tend to thrive. He swabbed everywhere, from the bathroom to the control room, and even my own work space.

Gerba: Usually phones are the germiest.

Roker: There were more bacteria here than there were on the toilet seat in the bathroom.

Gerba: This is where sharing things is not a good idea in the office.

Roker: Nobody touch my phone!

Roker: He also tested the area where some of our producers work — not a pretty sight. Then it was back to the lab for further analysis.

The following week, Dr. Gerba met with producer Dee Dee Thomas and myself to share more of the results.

Roker: Have you guys met before?

Gerba: No, I've met her desk though.

Roker: Now how would you describe your desk?

Thomas: Very messy, but I've gone onto this cleaning frenzy.

Roker: The type of Wet Ones Dee Dee was using were antibacterial, but they obviously weren't getting the job done. First of all, they are for use on hands and face, not desktops. But also, Gerba says antibacterial products only kill a portion of the spectrum of bacteria that's out there. Bottom line, for surfaces, you need something that says "disinfecting" or "sanitizing" in order to attack most bacteria as well as viruses.

Thomas: There's people in my office that sneeze openly. And cough and hack and eat, so I've been carrying Wet Ones, wiping with alcohol, and I've got the Purell. And every time I leave my desk and encounter people, I come back and do a quick swab of my triangle. And now you're telling me that...

Roker: Do you feel you have a very clean desk?

Thomas: I would have thought.

Gerba: Let's look at some of the results we found. We actually found the parainfluenza virus on your phone. And we did find it on your desk. And the control room and the coffee machine.

Roker: How do you feel about that?

Thomas: Not really good.

Roker: Among the bacteria identified was staphylococcus on our elevator buttons, and on some of the phones in our office. That can cause skin infections and meningitis. And on a mouse in our control room, Dr. Gerba found E coli, responsible for ailments ranging from diarrhea to kidney failure.

Roker: What should Dee Dee do?

Gerba: She was just wiping the area, and that really is giving the germs a free ride around your desktop. That's probably why it was so bad.

Roker: Instead, to kill most bacteria and viruses, use products with the words "disinfecting" or "sanitizing" on the label.

Thomas: I thought I was being diligent.

Roker: And you were, but you were just diligent in moving the germs around.

Gerba: The main thing to remember is you have to kill these guys, not move them around. You're actually doing them a favor by cleaning all the time. You really have to kill them on the spot. And use Al's desk as much as possible.

Thomas: Oh, I will.

Roker: No, I don't want you anywhere near it.

Thomas: Oh, I will.

Roker: Dr. Gerba says that in addition to washing your hands properly, cleaning your work area, your phone, your desk and computer keyboard and mouse just once a day will significantly cut

down on your exposure to potentially harmful germs. And we're happy to report Dee Dee got some disinfecting products for her desk, so now things over there are much cleaner.

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