

GERM HIDING PLACES

Germs. Call them bacteria, call them viruses, you'll find them pretty much everywhere. Most of them are harmless, but one percent of all those germs can actually cause anything from a runny nose to a life threatening infection. So, you target places like the toilet and the counters... But you haven't even scratched the surface. Rebekah George, Editor of "Prevention" magazine, was on *The Early Show Saturday Edition* from a home in Tenafly, N.J. Jersey to show where germs are lurking, even in the cleanest homes.

1. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT GERMS *INSIDE*, BUT THE PROBLEM REALLY STARTS BEFORE YOU GET IN THE DOOR.

It starts with the welcome mat, which welcomes in a lot of unwanted guests. It is outside the front door, one of the dirtiest spots in your house. In fact, one study found that nearly 96-percent of shoe soles carry traces of coliform, which includes fecal bacterial. Once bacteria get into your mat, anytime you walk on it, you give them a free ride into your home. You walk around, you pick up germs, then you rest your shopping bags on your welcome mat while you fish around for your keys, you bring them inside and rest them on your countertops, spreading all those germs to the countertop.

1A. WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT OUR WELCOME MATS?

First of all, remember never to put your shopping bags on your countertops. Then, keep that welcome mat clean by spraying it once a week with a fabric-safe disinfectant, like Lysol disinfectant spray. And, always take your shoes off and leave them at the door.

2. NOW WE'RE IN THE KITCHEN, AND THERE ARE A LOT OF HIDING PLACES THERE WE MIGHT NOT HAVE THOUGHT OF, BEGINNING WITH THE SINK.

That's right, you clean your sink, but do you clean the faucet? Running water keeps the screen inside the faucet moist, and that's an ideal condition for bacteria growth. Because tap water is far from sterile, if you accidentally touch the screen with dirty fingers or food, bacteria can grow on the faucet. Those bacteria can form biofilm that sticks on the screen, then can break off and get into your food or on your dishes.

2A. SO, WHAT DO WE DO?

Once a week, remove the screen and soak it in a diluted bleach solution (just follow the directions on the label). Replace the screen, and make sure you let the water run a few minutes before you use it.

3. IT'S NOT MUCH OF A SURPRISE THAT THE GARBAGE DISPOSAL MIGHT BREED GERMS, BUT YOU SAY IT'S WORSE THAN WE MIGHT THINK.

The garbage disposal collects raw food, like chicken or spinach you're rinsing off for dinner, and that food is often loaded with harmful bacteria, like salmonella. It can make anyone, especially the young, the elderly or anyone with a compromised immune system, very ill. There are more than half a million bacteria in the kitchen sink, that's about 1,000 times more than the average toilet. The metal part of the disposal produces ions that can help kill germs, but they love to grown on the crevices in and around the slimy rubber stopper. So your disposal can become a real breeding ground for bacteria, contaminating your hands, and everything you touch, like your dishes and utensils.

3A. HOW DO WE CLEAN IT?

At least once a week, clean the disposal's rubber stopper with a diluted bleach solution, equal parts bleach and water. Scrub it really well, and rinse. Soap and water just aren't good enough.

4. THE DISH TOWEL IS ANOTHER GERM DANGER ZONE.

You probably use your dish towel to dry your dishes, then pick up spills, then dry your dishes before you wash it. A recent study of hundreds of homes across the U.S. Found that about seven percent of kitchen towels were contaminated with MRSA, the difficult-to-treat staph bacterial that can cause life-threatening skin infections. Dish towels also rate high for dangerous strains of E. Coli and other bacteria.

4A. SO, SHOULD WE STICK TO PAPER TOWELS?

You should use paper towels to clean countertops, and save the dishrag to dry only pots and plates that have just been washed. And remember to change your towels or wash them at least twice a week in hot water and bleach.

5. NEXT UP, THE FRIDGE. SURELY MOST PEOPLE CLEAN OUT THEIR REFRIGERATOR.

Most people clean the fridge, but hardly anyone remembers to clean the seal around the refrigerator door. A University of Arizona survey of 160 homes in three cities found that the seal around the fridge tested positive 83-percent of the time for common molds. That mold spreads every time you open the fridge door, and that exposes anyone susceptible to allergies and it could contaminate the food. Or, you can lean on the seal, then touch food and spread it that way.

5A. WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Wipe those fridge seals down with, again, a diluted bleach solution or a disinfectant, and make sure you scrub it clean every time you clean your refrigerator.

6. NOW, YOU'RE MOVING DOWN THE HALL TO THE BATHROOM.

Yes, but before we get there, you might want to do a little vacuuming, and that vacuum is a big hiding place for germs. Vacuums are "meals-on-wheels" for bacteria, and that includes the bags and the brushes. It sucks in all the bacteria, and bits of food you drop on the carpet, or that your kids drop on the carpet when they eat, and all that is just sitting or spinning around in the vacuum cleaner bag. Another recent study showed that 13-percent of all vacuum cleaner brushes tested positive for E. Coli, which means you could spread it around the house every time you use the vacuum.

6A. HOW CAN WE STOP THOSE GERMS?

First of all, you have to change the bag frequently, and do it outside if you can. That avoids the cloud of bacteria that comes out of the bag when you remove it from spreading around the air in your home. Vacuum bags with anti-bacterial linings are the best, and they are available for many of the major brands. Also, clean the cavity of a bagless vacuum with diluted bleach and let it air dry.

7. NOW THE BATHROOM. I THINK WE KNOW WHERE THE GERMS ARE THERE.

The toilet, the tub, the countertops, you probably scrub them like crazy. But you're missing one very big breeding ground for germs, and that is the soap dispenser. And that soap dispenser is usually contaminated with fecal matter. You use the bathroom, you wash your hands, and that's what gets all over the soap dispenser. It's constantly being touched by dirty hands, and that means there is a continuous growth of bacteria.

7A. WHAT DO WE DO?

Be sure you scrub your hands thoroughly, for 15-20 seconds, with hot water. If you're teaching your children to wash their hands, I recommend you sing happy birthday while they wash their hands, and that will give them the right amount of time. If you have a disinfectant, you should use that, too. And if you have an anti-bacterial wipe, you should wipe that over your hands.

8. ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD WORRY ABOUT?

Cell phones!! We leave them everywhere, on counters, in public bathrooms. Several studies on cell phones and PDAs found that they carry tons of bacteria, including staph (which can cause skin infections), pseudomonas (eye infections), and salmonella (stomach ailments). Many electronic devices are sheathed in leather or vinyl cases, which provide even more creases and crevices for germs to hide.

8A. WHAT DO WE DO?

Use a disinfecting wipe a few times a week, and be conscious of where you put your cell phone.