



The 8 germiest places in the mall

Health.com

By **Cari Wira Dineen**, Health.com
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The 8 germiest places in the mall

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Anywhere people gather is filled with bacteria and viruses

Filthiest place in the restroom is actually the sink, experts say

Each key on an ATM contains, on average, 1,200 germs, a study found

Before trying the latest gizmo, quickly wipe it down with a disinfecting wipe

(Health.com) -- During the craziness of the holidays, the last thing you want is to get sidelined with a cold, flu, stomach bug -- or worse. But while you're checking items off your shopping list, you may be exposing yourself to germs -- like flu viruses, E. coli, and staph -- that can make you sick.

"Anywhere people gather is filled with bacteria and viruses, and a crowded shopping mall is a perfect example," says Philip Tierno, Ph.D., director of clinical microbiology and immunology at New York University Langone Medical Center.

With that in mind, we asked a panel of experts to rank the worst germ hot spots at your local shopping center. Check out the ewww-inducing results -- and tips for keeping yourself in the clear.

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Black Friday begins at Macy's

1. Restroom sinks

The filthiest area in a restroom (and therefore in the whole mall) isn't the toilet handle or the doorknob -- it's the sink, our experts say. Bacteria, including E. coli, fester on the faucet and handles because people touch those surfaces right after using the toilet, explains panelist Charles Gerba, Ph.D., a professor of environmental microbiology at the

University of Arizona.

"The sink area is a moist environment, so bacteria can survive longer there," he adds.

Watch out for soap dispensers, too -- not only are they handled by

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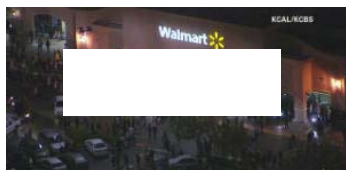
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Black Friday shoppers injured



Avoiding travel germs

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many dirty hands, but the soap itself may harbor germs. When Gerba's team tested liquid soap from refillable dispensers in public bathrooms, they found that one in four contained unsafe levels of bacteria.

Protect yourself: Wash your hands thoroughly after using a public loo: Lather with soap for at least 20 seconds, then rinse well. Use a paper towel to turn off the water and open the door. If there's no soap or paper towels, kill germs with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, using at least a tablespoon of product.

Gerba also advises avoiding refillable soap dispensers (usually made of clear plastic with a removable lid) and only using liquid soap that comes in a sealed refill; if that's not an option or you're not sure, follow up with hand sanitizer.

[Health.com: How to stop a cold in its tracks](#)

2. Food court tables

Even if you see the table being wiped down, that doesn't mean it's clean, says panelist Elaine Larson, Ph.D., a professor of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University: "The rags themselves can actually spread harmful bacteria such as *E. coli* if they are not changed and washed regularly."

Protect yourself: Consider stashing a pack of hard-surface disinfecting wipes in your purse so you can swipe the table before you sit down. "Look for ones that contain alcohol or another disinfecting agent in order to make sure you're killing germs, not just wiping away grime," Tierno says.

3. Escalator handrails

"In our testing, we have found food, *E. coli*, urine, mucus, feces, and blood on escalator handrails," says Gerba. "And where there is mucus, you may also find cold and flu viruses." Tierno concurs: "We've found respiratory flora on handrails," he says, "which makes sense because people cough into their hands, then touch the rails."

Protect yourself: Play it safe: Avoid touching handrails altogether, recommends Gerba, unless you absolutely have to -- in which case, give yourself a generous squirt of hand sanitizer afterward.

[Health.com: The germiest places in America](#)

4. ATM keypads

After testing 38 ATMs in downtown Taipei, Chinese researchers found that each key contained an average of 1,200 germs, including illness-inducing microbes like *E. coli* and cold and flu viruses, Tierno says. The worst key of all? The "enter" button, because everyone has to touch it, Gerba points out.

Protect yourself: "Knuckle" ATM buttons -- you'll avoid getting germs on your fingertips, which are more likely to find their way to your nose and mouth than your knuckles. And be sure to wash your hands or use sanitizer afterward.

5. Toy stores

Toy stores can actually be germier than play areas, carousels, and other kid-friendly zones, Tierno says, simply because of the way little ones behave there. "Kids lick toys, roll them on their heads, and rub them on their faces, and all that leaves a plethora of germs on the

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toys," he says. The goods their parents don't buy end up back on the shelves, where your kid finds them.

Protect yourself: If you make a purchase, wipe down any toy that isn't in a sealed box or package with soap and water, alcohol, or vinegar (which has antimicrobial properties) before giving it to your child. And, of course, reach for the hand sanitizer after you've been hands-on in the toy aisle.

[Health.com: Should I avoid using public hand sanitizers?](#)

6. Fitting rooms

You won't pick up much from the hooks or the chair. The germ culprit? What you try on.

"After people try on clothing, skin cells and perspiration can accumulate on the inside," says Tierno. "Both can serve as food for bacterial growth." You can even pick up antibiotic-resistant bacteria, such as MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), just by trying on clothes, says Tierno.

Protect yourself: Always wear full-coverage underwear (no thongs!) when trying on clothes, especially pants, bathing suits, and any other garment that touches your genitals or rectum. Bandage cuts or scrapes before trying on clothes, as "open wounds can be a gateway to dangerous bacteria," Tierno says. And be sure to wash new clothes before you wear them.

7. Gadget shops

While you're playing around on that new smartphone, you could be picking up germs from the thousand people who tested it out before you. "Most stores do clean their equipment," says Tierno, "but they certainly don't clean after each use."

A study published last year in the *Journal of Applied Microbiology* found that viruses easily transfer between glass surfaces (think iPad or smartphone faces) and fingertips. And a recent report found that of four iPads swabbed in two Apple stores located in New York City, one contained *Staphylococcus aureus*, the most common cause of staph infections, while another registered a bacteria associated with skin rash. That's not even counting the cold and flu germs that might be lurking.

Protect yourself: Before you try out the latest gizmo, quickly wipe it down with a disinfecting wipe. And (yes, once again) use a hand sanitizer after you're done.

[Health.com: How to clean everything better](#)

8. Makeup samples

Heading to the makeup counter? You might end up picking up a staph infection right along with the latest lipstick shade. A 2005 study found that between 67% and 100% of makeup-counter testers were contaminated with bacteria, including staph, strep, and *E. coli*. "This study shows us that someone was sick or went to the bathroom, didn't wash their hands, and then stuck their finger in the sample," Tierno says.

Protect yourself: "Avoid using public makeup samples to apply cosmetics to your lips, eyes, or face," says Tierno, who suggests asking for a single-use unit (you open it, try it, and throw it away). If that's not available, use a tissue to wipe off the sample and then apply the product to the back of your hand.

The best line of defense: Buy then try. Returning stuff to the store may be a little more of a hassle, but it's a heck of a lot better than bringing home a nasty bug.

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Softship



Speaking of things that are contagious - can you "catch" paranoia from articles like this?

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AusiSceptic1

certainly, the first symptoms are a slavish belief in everything you read as the festering ideas congregate in your neurons

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Blasius

Some scientists have suggested that growing up in environments that are 'too clean' can lead to the development of allergies. The people in Japan where they have the highest hygiene standards get having more allergies after they come to the US with lower hygiene standards. So we should not too se... more

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KtinME

If you want to avoid germs, live by yourself in a bubble. When you go out in public, try being more considerate - keep your own hands (and bodies) clean, cover your coughs and sneezes, and don't go out when you're sick. And for God's sake, try not to make a disgusting mess in the bathroom!! Every... more

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JimFoxvog

"The mall" I thought meant the National Mall. Mostly grass and trees, not toy stores and food courts. Much nicer mall.

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*tensor*

Nat Mall hasn't had a lot of grass for more than a decade ... even before that hideous WWII monstrosity bisected the lovely expanse of what was once an aesthetic landscape.

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*AtheistRite*

History lesson "Role of germs in making of the USA". Did you know how many Europeans became "Americans." When some Europeans set out to discover a shorter route to India, they "discovered" the Americas. This was right around the time of the industrial revolution in Europe that had also brought a wea... [more](#)

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*brent8577*

i pay plenty attention to the horrible situation the world, our country and government is in - all while still washing my hands. when i go to a restuarant, i wash before i eat after they take the menus away. this human waste i used to spend time with never used soap for anything and i bought him a b... [more](#)

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*MyNamesTed*

Hey! They left out "a plate of Sbarro's lasagna."

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*a605118*

Show me what Paranoia looks like.. THIS IS what paranoia looks like.

I mean really? REALLY? Insane germaphobes is right.. you have to be nuts to worry about stuff like this.. of course while you are busy worrying about germs you cant pay attention to the government taking away more of your rights.

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*specharka*

Wow. An entire article geared towards insane germophobes. Enjoy contracting your next chronic disease while you continue crippling your immune system.

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*Ob3liX*

whats upsetting is that some people will read this & actually not want to was thier hands after the rest room for fear its dirty to do so. When im in a public restroom & i see someone not wash thier hands first i gag then i have fantasys of beating them.

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*rogueman*

I use my foot to flush the toilet, I used paper towels to turn on water faucet and to open the doors in the restroom. I used paper towels when filling my gas tank. There are some sick people wander among the living, and I don't rely on healthy immune system to save me from getting sick. The immun... [more](#)

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*KtinME*

If people would only deposit their urine IN the toilet the floor and seat of the toilet wouldn't be so disgusting.

It's incredible that people are so terrified of the seat but they think nothing of spraying everything in sight and

just walking away from it. Animals.
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tensor

Flush with foot vs. flush with hand falls in the category of lesser of evils. Solution is to do what your mother taught: go before you leave home. And then, don't engage in a mall chow fest.

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MyNamesTed

"Using your foot to to flush the toilet is a little inconsiderate when you think about it"

No, because what the original poster didn't mention is that he was born without any arms. You don't even want to know how he wipes.

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ttony21

Using your foot to to flush the toilet is a little inconsiderate when you think about it. The spot on the floor around the toilet is horrific. You're basically taking the germs up from the floor and onto the toilet handle that other people are going to touch. The more considerate choice is to use a ... [more](#)

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567123

This looks like guidance for a chemo patient or someone with an immune deficiency. The vast majority of us have a well developed immune system able to kill off the minute doses of bacteria we may pick up from any of these places. The only real worry is in food, where there is the chance of a high do... [more](#)

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Softship

Hey 567123 - I've been on immune suppressants (lung transplantation) for 8 years and I'm not even as paranoid as this article suggests healthy people should be. OK, I don't use handrails on escalators or stairways, but I don't worry about the tables in good courts, because my food doesn't come into ... [more](#)

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567123

rogue man what do you think a vaccine is? It is a small dose of an organism that allows our immune system build a defence. If we try and live in a sterile environment it only weakens our bodies abilities to fight against the real dangers when they come.

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rogueman

Methinks some are in life denial and need medication dosage increased. You have been warned, yet you make excuses that it's OK.

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lonamic

"Most men don't wash their hands". Hmm...good point...but at the risk of being gross, I take a shower every morning...so what I held in my hand at the urinal was most likely more germ-free than anything I might have touched in the mall. I'm not sure I could find a scientist to test that theory but I... [more](#)

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slg/vnv74

Its the urine and feces you get on your hands later in the day, throughout the day....and yes everyone gets them, thats why people are supposed to wash after going to the bathroom

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matte

Actually thats debatable. while yes a shower does decrease the germs, it far from eliminates them. The moist and dark environment around your junk will expedite the growth of anything left behind after the shower.

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Kperspective

You don't need a Ph D to come up with that info. I would add the male restroom door-handle (on the inside) is filthier than the lady's, most men don't wash their hands after...

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By *Cari Wira Dineen*, [Health.com](#)

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"Anywhere people gather is filled with bacteria and viruses, and a crowded shopping mall is a perfect example," says Philip Tierno, Ph.D., director of clinical microbiology and immunology at New York University Langone