



## **The War on Germs**

### **fighting the unseen army that can make you sick**

Hygiene is one of those lessons that children go conveniently deaf to. I recall my mother's words echoing down the hallway as I headed off to school: "Have you washed your hands and face?" Of course I hadn't, and I raced out before I was caught and dragged to the bathroom. I was a kid with better things to do; and anyway, from what I could see, when I bothered to look, I didn't look dirty, so why wash? Although that was back in the 1950's, adults knew enough about germs to take precautions against the illnesses that they could cause; but I would suggest that less importance was given to microbes that were invisible to the naked eye than it was to visible dirt and grime. In many instances a quick wipe with a damp cloth did the job, and as long as the dishes looked and felt clean, they probably were. Today, we know that's a fallacy, yet we continue to regard personal and general hygiene as a bit of a nuisance that health experts over-react to.

The proof of the pudding, however, is in the eating; and if the apple crumble makes us sick, we are more inclined to blame the ingredients than how it was prepared and the cleanliness of the equipment used to make and eat it. Even a tiny speck of food left on the spoon from the last time it was washed can contain bacteria that cause food poisoning. Obviously, sterilising every single item in the kitchen is impractical and unnecessary. The human body has ways of combating germs by building immunity to a good portion, seeing us in good stead, most of the time. In fact, it has been suggested that homes that are super-hygienic place families, especially children, at risk of being severely affected by common illnesses because they haven't developed a natural immunity to them, unlike many others who are regularly exposed to the germs that cause them. That's not to say go back to the old days of a lick and a promise. We have gadgets and appliances that scrub and wash supposedly more efficiently than a hand brush and a dish cloth. Like electric dishwashers for example, although the ones I've seen still left residue on plates and cutlery. A good wash in hot soapy water followed by a rinse in fresh, clean water is, to my mind, a healthier option.

However clean they may be to begin with, at some stage the dishes and utensils will have to be touched by human hand, so ideal for transporting unwanted, disease-carrying freeloaders from one place to another. Washing hands with a quality, anti-bacterial soap can reduce this. As favourite meeting places for germs, most medical clinics and hospitals provide visitors with hand sanitiser from an easy-to-use dispenser on reception counters, and I recommend taking advantage of this facility both before and after consultations. The solution dries quickly, leaves no sticky residue and kills bacteria instantly. It is also available to the public from supermarkets and pharmacies, often in pump dispensers; plus containers small enough to be kept in a handbag. Recently, I noticed a stand outside a supermarket dispensing anti-bacterial shopping-trolley wipes, a great idea considering that here is another place for picking up germs. Aside from the trolley-handles, there are counters that people have touched, and money. Think about

the food you buy: every single item that goes into that germ-harboring trolley has been handled at some stage. Fruit and vegetables should be, and probably are, washed prior to eating, but was that before they went into the fridge, or after? And what about packaged and canned food - germ carriers, the lot of them! I'm not suggesting disinfecting everything on returning from the shops, but washing hands after handling these items can minimise the risk of contracting a debilitating virus.

Avoiding individuals coughing and sneezing their way through public places is a must: and if we are one of those people, we ought to have stayed home rather than spreading our illness around. Apart from the shops, there are work and school which we just have to attend, despite feeling like death warmed up from the cold we've contracted. It's our duty as martyrs to soldier on regardless; continuing to do our bit, even though others are infected thanks to our courage and unselfish dedication. Unfortunately, even wearing a protective face-mask doesn't guarantee staying free of contagious diseases floating in the air; nor will it prevent passing ours on to someone else. One single touch of anything exposed to bacteria is all it takes. We can catch a cold or a dose of the flu from a can of beans that the checkout lady scanned having touched every other item handled by every other customer who has already passed through. Some of these viruses can survive for twenty minutes or more on any surface, and it won't be long until they are back home and transferred to a bench top as the bags are unpacked. From there, it's anyone's guess where to. Washing hands helps, so too wiping surfaces with a disinfectant solution which should then be left to dry naturally to give the chemical a chance to do its job. The same applies to door-knobs and handles, definitely surfaces in toilets and bathrooms; anything, in fact, that residents of the household are likely to touch on a regular basis.

This may seem like overkill, but it's not. For the most part, sickness comes from taking bacteria and viruses into the body through the mouth or nose. Whatever is eaten or tasted, and air that is breathed, all carry microscopic organisms that have the potential to inflict discomfort and disease. Even after washing hands, as soon as something is touched, they are soon back on fingers and palms - thousands, maybe millions of unseen invaders waiting to slip into our bodies and wreak havoc. Sounds horrific doesn't it, like something from a sci-fi movie? And it is! The only real difference is that it isn't being enacted on the big screen, or even a very small screen: this David-and-Goliath battle is raging invisibly around us, on us, and inside us. I doubt it's one we will ever win; but we cannot afford to give up trying. As intelligent creatures we should at least be able to stay one or two steps ahead of a few zillion mindless microbes, surely?

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