



## NEWS

# Disgusting! Now wash your hands

When humans touch something gross, our instinct is to scrub up — unless we're in a dirty bathroom

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Yuck!

Researchers say the emotion that triggers this kind of verbal response is hard-wired in human brains to help avoid disease.

"The feelings we have about nasty stuff that might make us sick is disgust," says Dr. Val Curtis, one of the world's leading experts in hygiene behaviour.

"It turns out that we actually recognize different types of disease threats and have slightly different disgust systems within the brain that respond to those threats," says Curtis, director of the Hygiene Centre at the London School of Hy-

giene and Tropical Medicine.

In short, hygiene is in our genes.

"It's the voices of our ancestors in our heads saying, 'Don't touch. Don't eat sh\*\* because you'll die. And your kids will die. And you won't procreate.'"

But if we're born to be clean, why aren't more people doing that most basic thing — handwashing — to protect themselves and each other?

A gram of human feces "contains more viruses and bacteria than there are people on the planet," Curtis says. Yet only 43 per cent of moms in the United Kingdom washed their hands after changing a dirty diaper, a Hygiene Centre study found.

Just as dismal is a report from Ontario's auditor general noting just 28 per cent of doctors at 10 hospitals washed their hands between patients.

Why?

"I posed the same question to a set of doctors," Curtis says. "They said, 'Well, we wash after a patient.' I said . . . After a patient? Shouldn't it be before a patient?"

"They sort of stopped to think and said, 'Oh, yeah.'"

In Britain, Curtis says, evidence shows hospital workers generally do wash their hands but it's typically after contact with things that are disgusting — a bedpan or heavily soiled sheets or wound dressings.

Studies show there are three types of handwashing: habitual, motivated and planned.

• Habitual handwashing is the kind we do without thinking about it,

washing before dinner or after using a public toilet.

• Motivated handwashing is what you do after you come in contact with something you feel is disgusting.

• Planned handwashing, which public health officials are asking people to do, is a response to education and knowledge about disease.

But it's not enough to teach people about germs, Curtis says.

"You've got to creep them out."

The British government launched an aggressive hygiene campaign on TV last week, showing someone walking into an elevator, sneezing, and spreading the germs around.

"The U.K. government is interested in using the whole idea of disgust to get the message across that nasty, filthy surfaces that people have sneezed on and dirty hands — things like that — are disgusting," Curtis says. "That's actually a very

powerful way of motivating behaviour change."

This month, the Canadian government launched its own campaign around influenza and the H1N1 flu.

"Knowledge is the best defence and we want to keep Canadians continually informed with useful and timely information concerning influenza," Dr. David Butler-Jones, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, said in a statement. The Public Health Agency of Canada's website, fightflu.ca, takes a straitlaced, educational approach.

When Curtis heard the results of the *Star's* survey — that people washed more thoroughly in clean restrooms — she was not surprised.

"All the qualitative interviewing we've done says people hate dirty bathrooms," she says. "In a dirty bathroom, they get out quick as they can."

## Given nice sinks and taps, women pause to soap up

WOMEN from A1

"Water conservation," she confides. "I meticulously only use one hand entering a public washroom. I'll even use my elbow if I have to."

Having spent the last few days observing 100 women in restrooms across downtown Toronto, she was among three to wash just one hand.

Though all 100 women observed washed up in some way after using the toilet, only 88 washed both hands with soap and water. Here are some of the survey highlights:

**Varsity Theatre, May 5, 6:45 p.m.:** One woman takes a full 20 seconds to scrub her hands with soap under warm water. "It's because of the pig thing," she says. "I work in a public library. I'm fussy about germs." Still, she's finding it tedious to wash for the length of time some experts say is necessary to kill germs. "I've been doing 'Twinkle, Twinkle' in my head and reciting the alphabet but I'm finding it's a bit long."

**Royal Ontario Museum, May 6, 1:10 p.m.:** It's "Seniors' Day" and I thought the cafeteria washrooms would be hopping. Wrong. It's painfully quiet. The washroom is well-lit and a few ladies comment favourably on the "fresh" black and white colour scheme. The only person observed who didn't wash with soap and water is a child. Her mother explains she carries hand sanitizer for her daughter and "she didn't touch anything anyways."

**Eaton Centre, May 6, 3:30 p.m.:** The restroom near the Queen St. W. entrance is hygiene heaven. The haute communal sink looks like a watery wave made of glass and the touch-free faucets beckon shoppers exiting the stalls. Women actually wait in line to wash their hands and use the sleek dryers that blow air with the force of a Sukhoi fighter jet.

Unlike my colleague Corey Mintz, who noted the strong creep factor of being a man lingering in a men's room, loitering inside a woman's washroom proved almost as entertaining as an episode of *30 Rock*.

While reapplying mascara in the mirror for a fourth time inside a much less inviting upper-level washroom at the Eaton Centre with "press and hold" taps that prompt profanities, two girls from Buffalo enter. One is sick from a bad crab cake, the other asks for directions to a high-end shoe store.

I draw a map to Holt Renfrew and tell her about the store's Last Call outlet at Vaughan Mills.

Pale-faced and sweaty, Crab Cake Girl emerges from a stall.

"Can you keep this dryer going? I don't want anyone to hear me throw up," she pleads to her friend.

"Did you hear?" Shoe Girl a.k.a. Jenna Maroney answers. "This nice lady says there's a place in Toronto where I can buy my Louboutins for 70 per cent off."

CCG beelines it back to the stall.

## Clean hands

To take a survey and to see which GTA hospitals have the best "hand hygiene compliance," go to [thestar.com](http://thestar.com)

» [thestar.com](http://thestar.com) «



SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTO

## NO WATER AROUND? USE SANITIZER. MOISTURIZER HELPS, TOO

### Q. Sanitizer or plain soap?

**A.** Plain soap and water is fine when you're at home, says Liz McCreight, former head of the ministry of health and long-term care's Just Clean Your Hands program.

You don't need antimicrobial soap, she says.

"It doesn't have any extra effect. It's doing nothing for you." Get a good lather. It loosens dirt and reduces germs.

In hospitals, alcohol-based sanitizer is recommended.

"The reason we push alcohol is it's kinder to your hands. On a shift, you could clean your hands upwards of 200 times," she says.

Foam, gel or rinse, the key to an effective sanitizer is its alcohol content.

To kill bacteria and viruses, you need "a minimum of 60 per cent alcohol," McCreight says. "It's moving toward 70 per cent."

Check the label.

### Q. Cold water or warm water?

**A.** It doesn't matter. "The studies

really point to the comfort level of who's washing their hands," says Rob Donofrio, director of National Sanitation Foundation's Microbiology Laboratory.

Using warm water doesn't mean you'll destroy significantly more bacteria. "The temperatures aren't hot enough to disrupt the cell wall or kill the viruses," he says.

### Q. Moisturizer or not?

**A.** Definitely, McCreight says. "Cracked hands let in germs."

Diana Zlomislis

## Not prone to linger, men prefer a simple quick rinse

MEN from A1

Nor have I heard it happen. In the rare occasions that two male friends use the facilities at the same time, conversation stops at the door.

Over the past day, I've spent three or four hours in washrooms around town. I have overheard two conversations. One was about how much one dude enjoyed the movie *Remains of the Day*. The other was someone yelling at his buddy in the stall, "You're taking forever, dude!"

Here's my tally of how many of 100 men washed their hands:

**Varsity Theatre:** Just before a 7 p.m. showing of *Wolverine*, 17 of 20 men wash their hands, only about half use soap.

**MacDonald's:** It's no improvement the next day at MacDonald's. The first person in there is using the urinal. As I begin to wash, he zips up to leave. At the door, I ask why he hadn't washed his hands. He seems to think that I've been sent to test him and heads to the sink to wash up, but only adds soap when I demonstrate its use. During the lunch rush, 15 of 20 men wash their hands here. Only one spends as much as 20 seconds under the water. He thinks it's a bit paranoid, though. "I heard it was 30 seconds," he says.

**Royal Ontario Museum:** A gentleman says that, at home, he spends 20 seconds under the tap, but abroad he makes it a full minute. "I'm from Collingwood so this (the city) is foreign to me." He was top handwasher amongst 16 men who washed their hands.

**Eaton Centre:** There is a class structure to the Eaton Centre bathrooms. In the basement food court, the lighting is grim, the sinks are wet and the dudes are not talkative. The second floor is almost like a ladies' room. There's a lineup for the stalls. A long, cascading glass sink is used communally. One guy is actually doing his hair in the mirror, combing it into a wave like Fonzie. On the third floor there is lots of natural light but no hot water. After 10 minutes in and out of the stall, I notice that a couple of men have also been hanging out. They are in and out of the stalls with no flushing and they spend a while in front of the sinks with no washing. Maybe they are also restaurant critics on a bathroom assignment. It's my cue to leave. The mall's total was 16 out of 20 men who washed up.

**St. Marc Spa:** One place where you can hang around the men's room without making anyone uncomfortable is the bath house. On a slow, weekday night at St. Marc Spa downtown, everyone I see washes up. In fact, some take full showers.

I ask one man how long he usually washes his hands. "Are you the guy I met in the steam room?" he asks.

Men in tiny white towels are way friendlier than mall shoppers. Maybe it's the loud techno music.

From what I saw, we, as a gender, need to step up our game with the handwashing. Ladies, the solution is in your hands. Have a frank discussion with your man about his handwashing habits. He may not do it for society, but he'll do it for you.

Do you really want to spend the next 50 years sharing a bag of popcorn with a dude who may or may not have washed his hands?