

HEALTHY LIVING

Flushing out germaphobes

Fearful of what's lurking inside public restrooms? New advances may help you make a clean getaway

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Cox News Service

Germaphobes, rest easy. Public bathrooms are joining your dedicated battle against the bugs.

With self-dispensing soap, towels and faucets now standard, we're just a few products shy of attaining the germaphobe's Holy Grail — an untouchable experience in a public bathroom.

Chick-fil-A, for instance, is testing a new L-shaped-handled door that can be pulled with the wrist or forearm, designed for a germ-free getaway. And Georgia-Pacific, which already makes an automatic paper-towel dispenser in three sizes, is testing touch-free products that would dispense soap and toilet paper by a simple hand wave.

Combine these services, and we may soon be able to get from point A to point B without touching a single bathroom fixture.

Which is a relief for a growing number of people who now make a considerable effort to avoid flesh-to-germ contact in a place many consider the epicenter for contamination.

"Years ago, I don't ever remember seeing a waste basket by the door, but now if you don't have one, you'll have a pile of towels by the door," said Tom Banks, director of marketing for Georgia-Pacific's Commercial Division. "Awareness about hygiene is growing. There is more concern, and it's manifesting itself."

Almost half of the people queried in a 2007 Kelton Research survey won't use their hands to open a public restroom door. They either grab a paper towel or use their elbow instead, according to more than 1,000 adults surveyed.

Sean Randall, an Atlanta father of four, would consider himself one of those adults. Whenever he and his children enter a public restroom, he has simple instructions: "I tell them, 'Don't touch anything!'"

At his favorite pub, Highland Tap in Atlanta, Randall was surprised recently by a new, waterless urinal. The Falcon Waterfree Technologies toilet for men has seen a 50 percent increase in metro Atlanta sales of the

waterfree urinals since the Georgia drought, according to the company.

Pub staff gave Randall a "pee green" pin as part of a mini-campaign promoting the new product. He attached the pin to his shirt, but water conservation was not on his mind.

"Nothing to flush, nothing to touch," he said. "Nice."

Not all untouchable

About two years ago, Georgia-Pacific created a team of researchers to study bathroom habits and cleanliness to steer product development.

They studied everything from paper towels in pull-down machines to the automatic versions. And they scrutinized research on hand-washing at ballparks.

They discovered a mix of paranoia and utter slackers. Researchers for the American Society for Microbiology found only 57 percent of guys observed at Atlanta's Turner Field washed up, compared with 95 percent of women.

Still, hands-free may not always be the best solution — at least in the case of toilet paper.

"To be honest, it's one thing to have wet hands because no paper towels come out, but if you wave your hand for toilet paper and it doesn't work, there's a much bigger risk. And you are stuck in there," Banks said.

So automatic TP is still under review at Georgia-Pacific.

Germs fly at airports

While doctors stress the importance of common sense and proper hand-washing in bathrooms (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water), they also believe some of the bathroom jitters may be



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misdirected.

Oftentimes, the culprit of an infection is not a hard surface, such as a toilet seat or a door handle. It's other people, the physicians say.

"While I can't say zero, I would say the risk [in the bathroom] is very low," said Robin Dretler, infectious disease specialist at DeKalb Medical Center in Decatur, Ga. "The surfaces are hard and cold, and they don't live there that long."

While little data is available about bathroom disease transmission, doctors say germs can survive on hard surfaces for minutes or even hours. But sneezing then touching someone's hands is typically an easier way to spread disease.

A handshake. A high-five. A hug.

"The one place I am paranoid is at the airport [bathrooms]. You have so many people coming and going from all over the country," said Dr. James Steinberg, medical director at

Emory University's Crawford Long Hospital in Atlanta, who believes extreme caution in bathrooms at the airport has helped him stave off illness while traveling. "When I am in an airport, I am rubbing alcohol-based sanitizer on my hands all the time."

And Dr. Bill Schaffner, chairman of the Department of Preventative Health Medicine at the Vanderbilt University Medical School, makes another point he says often gets lost.

Lathering up in the bathroom is not just about delousing bathroom germs.

It also provides an opportunity for people to wash away the germs they've accumulated around and about — computer keyboards, coffeepots, copy machines and, of course, germs stemming from any person-to-person contact.

"The quip among infectious-disease specialists is that we know it's a good idea to wash your hands on your way in and out of the bathroom," he said. ■

An Untouchable Door

SanitGrasp, which makes the L-shaped-handle for doors now being tested at Chick-fil-A restaurants, was founded by marketing executive Matthew Fulkerson of Cumming, Ga., in 2005. Here's more about the product.



The SanitGrasp lets you leave the restroom without your hand touching the door.

- How it works: L-shaped handle for door that can be pulled with the wrist or forearm so you don't have to touch flesh to the door.

- Cost of the door handle: \$124

- Door handles sold: About 400, most of which were purchased during the past year.

- How he came up with the idea: Years ago, Fulkerson was disgusted by going to a restaurant bathroom and seeing people leave without washing up. "I found it not to be very comforting, and I thought there's got to be an easy and simple way to get out of the bathroom without having to touch the door."

- Update: Two months ago, he licensed the product to a New Jersey company and now receives royalties.

- What's next: Fulkerson said he's now working on a product that would allow you to lock a bathroom stall door without having to touch the lock.

A Doctor's Handshake Dilemma

If you think bathrooms are bad, imagine the dilemma for doctors, whose very business generally requires the presence of germs. But they're also professionals, meaning when they meet or see people, they shake hands.

Dr. Robin Dretler, a 57-year-old infectious disease specialist at DeKalb Medical Center in Decatur, Ga., uses the fist-to-fist hand bump with his friends. He said they are all used to it by now.

And while tempted to use what is also known

as "pounding it" with patients, he has held off.

"I think they would think it's too weird," said Dretler, who carries a pencil in his right hand when seeing patients to decrease the number of handshakes.

And while Dr. Bill Schaffner, chairman of Vanderbilt University's Department of Preventative Health Medicine, believes the "hearty handshake" is the American way, he has seen people with colds and flu around campus do yoga-like bows for greetings.

"I think that is very polite and very smart, too," he says.

When push comes to shove, if someone coughs into his or her hands, Dr. James Steinberg, medical director at Emory University's Crawford Long Hospital in Atlanta, tries to delicately say no or joke about why they shouldn't touch. If it's unavoidable, he washes his hands immediately afterward.

