

10 Worst Germ Hot Spots

Locations that may surprise you—and how to make a clean sweep By Alyssa Shaffer

1. *Kitchen Faucet*

That metal aeration screen at the end of the faucet is a total germ magnet.

Running water keeps the screen moist, 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, explains microbiologist Kelly Reynolds, PhD, an associate professor of community environment and policy at the University of Arizona College of Public Health. Over time, bacteria build up and form a wall of pathogens called biofilm that sticks to the screen. "Eventually, that biofilm may even be big enough to break off and get onto your food or dishes," she notes.

Keep It Clean: Once a week, remove the screen and soak it in a diluted bleach solution--follow the directions on the label. Replace the screen, and let the water run a few minutes before using.

2. *Garbage Disposal*

Bacteria from last night's dinner could end up on today's food and utensils if you're not careful.

That raw chicken or spinach you're rinsing for dinner is often loaded with harmful bacteria, which can make the young, the elderly, or anyone with a compromised immune system seriously ill. In fact, there are often more than 500,000 bacteria in the kitchen sink--about 1,000 times more than the average toilet has. Although the metal part of the disposal produces ions that can help kill germs, they still love to grow on the crevices in and around the slimy rubber stopper. That means your disposal can become party central for bacteria, contaminating whatever touches it--dishes, utensils, even your hands.

Keep It Clean: At least once a week, clean the disposal's rubber stopper with a diluted bleach solution--soap and water aren't enough.

3. *Welcome Mat*

It serves to greet not only your guests but also all the bugs on the bottoms of their shoes.

In fact, one study found that nearly 96% of shoe soles had traces of coliform, which includes fecal bacteria. "The area near your front door is one of the dirtiest in the house," says Reynolds. Once bacteria plant their stakes in your mat, anytime you walk on it, you give them a free ride into your home.

Keep It Clean: Spray the doormat once a week with a fabric-safe disinfectant (such as Lysol Disinfectant Spray). Leave shoes at the door, and avoid resting bags and groceries on the mat, too

4. Vacuum Cleaner

It's all in the bag—including spreadable germs.

"Vacuums—including the brushes and bags—are like meals-on-wheels for bacteria," says Charles Gerba, PhD, professor of environmental biology at the University of Arizona "You suck in all this bacteria and food, creating an atmosphere for growth." A recent study by Gerba and his team found that 13% of all vacuum cleaner brushes tested positive for *E. coli*, which means you could spread it around the house each time you use the appliance.

Keep It Clean: Change your vacuum bag frequently, and do so outdoors to avoid the cloud of bacteria that filters into the air. (Vacuum bags that feature antibacterial linings are best, and are available for many major brands.) Clean the cavity of a bagless vacuum with diluted bleach and let it air-dry.

5. Dish Towel

You know a sponge can harbor nasty germs, but dish towels are just as dangerous.

A recent study of hundreds of homes across the United States found that about 7% of kitchen towels were contaminated with MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), the difficult-to-treat staph bacteria that can cause life-threatening skin infections. Dish towels also rated tops for dangerous strains of *E. coli* and other bacteria. We often use towels to wipe up spills, says Reynolds, then reuse before washing them, which spreads germs.

Keep It Clean: Stick to paper towels to clean countertops, and save the dishrag to dry just-washed pots and plates. Change towels or launder at least twice a week in hot water and bleach.

6. Car Dashboard

This is your vehicle's second-most-common spot for bacteria and mold.

Here's why: When air—which carries mold spores and bacteria—gets sucked in through the vents, it's often drawn to the dashboard, where it can deposit the spores and germs. Because the dashboard receives the most sun and tends to stay warm, it's prime for growth. (The number one germ zone? Food spills.)

Keep It Clean: Regularly swipe the inside of your car with disinfecting wipes. Be more vigilant during allergy season—about 20 million Americans are affected by asthma, which is caused in part by an allergic reaction to mold.

7. Soap Dispensers

About 25% of public restroom dispensers are contaminated by fecal bacteria.

Soap that harbors bacteria may sound ironic, but that's exactly what a recent study found. "Most of these containers are never cleaned, so bacteria grows as the soap scum builds up," says Gerba. "And the bottoms are touched by dirty hands, so there's a continuous culture going on feeding millions of bacteria."

Keep It Clean: Be sure to scrub hands thoroughly for 15 to 20 seconds with plenty of hot water--and if you have an alcohol gel disinfectant, use that, too.

8. Restaurant Ketchup Bottle

Those condiments on the tabletop are grimmer than you think.

It's the rare eatery that regularly bleaches down condiment containers. And the reality is that many people don't wash their hands before eating, says Reynolds. So while you may be diligent, the guy who poured the ketchup before you may not have been, which means his germs are now on your fries.

Keep It Clean: Squirt hand sanitizer on the outside of the bottle or use a disinfectant wipe before you grab it. Holding the bottle with a napkin won't help--they're porous, so microorganisms can walk right through, says Reynolds.

9. Refrigerator Seal

Do you scrub the inside of your fridge? It's not enough.

A University of Arizona survey of 160 homes in three US cities found that the seal around the fridge tested positive 83% of the time for common molds. The mold can spread every time the refrigerator door opens--exposing anyone who's susceptible to allergies and potentially contaminating the food.

Keep It Clean: Wipe fridge seals at least once a week with a diluted bleach solution or disinfectant.

10. Cell Phone

Drop your cell any place that's convenient? Read this first.

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 plenty of creases and crevices for germs to hide. / **Keep It Clean:** Use a disinfecting wipe a few times a week, and be conscious of where you rest personal items