

The Filthy Office and Infections: Is your desk cleaner than your kitchen table or the office toilet?

For many faculty and staff at Tufts, the office is their home away from home. It is where they spend most of their time and because we spend so much time in our offices, it is important to understand the infectious diseases that can be transmitted there. Yes, you could get sick from your own computer and desk.

Many of our office surfaces are not as sanitary as we think. Desks, phones, computer keyboards and mice are key germ transfer points because people touch them so often. In addition, they may become contaminated with pathogens by direct contact with human fluids or secretions (mucus, saliva, blood). Finally, coughing and sneezing can leave behind "a minefield of viruses" that can live on a surface for up to three days. Despite the contamination, people don't clean their desktops frequently and custodians don't touch people's desks to avoid accidental misplacement or loss of important documents.



As Dr. Gerba said in a CNN interview in 2006: "Nobody ever cleans a desktop until they start sticking to it, from what we've found," "A lot of people eat and slop on their desks all the time so it basically turns into a bacteria cafeteria during the day, and that's one of the reasons you get a lot on your desktops." According to a survey by the American Dietetic Association and ConAgra Foods' Home Food Safety program, a majority of Americans continue to eat lunch (62 percent) and snack throughout the day (50 percent) at their desks. In another study of offices, parainfluenza virus could be isolated from one-third of all offices tested. A study by the University of Arizona in 2002 found the typical worker's desk has hundreds of times

more bacteria per square inch than an office toilet seat.

If that's not disturbing enough, desks, phones and other private surfaces are also prime habitats for the viruses that cause colds and flu. Bacteria, which can cause strep throat, pneumonia and other conditions, have also been isolated from computer keyboards. But health experts say that simple office hygiene can reduce infection risks dramatically. However, according to the Home Food Safety survey, only 36 percent of respondents clean their work areas (desktop, keyboard, mouse) weekly and 64 percent do so only once a month or less.

To lower your chance of infection from your desk we recommend that you:

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water, and keeping your desk stocked with moist towelettes or hand sanitizer for those times you can't get to the sink.
- Treat your desktop like you would your kitchen table and counters at home: Clean all surfaces, whether at home or work, before you prepare or eat food on them.

A clean desktop and hands are your best defense to avoid foodborne illnesses at the office.

In addition to desk top hygiene, Tufts Environmental Health and Safety can provide guidance to the Tufts community on indoor air quality, ergonomics, and other office safety areas.

"Generally, research evidence suggests that a large portion of gastrointestinal and respiratory illnesses can be prevented through improved environmental hygiene, with an emphasis on better hand and surface cleaning practices" (Boone and Gerba, 2007)