

# An incredibly filthy story you must read

**We are a shamefully unhygienic nation. It's time that we cleaned up our act**

**B**efore you continue, perhaps you should wash your hands. Why? Because we are a filthy nation. You're probably familiar with the beard scandal this month, in which male facial hair was unfavourably compared with toilet seats. Still, they weren't as dirty as our kitchen sinks, which on average contain 100,000 times more germs than a toilet bowl.

Surveys by the Global Hygiene Council (GHC) repeatedly show our homes to be the dirtiest in any developed country, with a third of our kitchen surfaces failing cleanliness tests. And we are no better at cleaning ourselves. A third of British women admit to going up to three days without a wash, one in seven of us often leave it two days before picking up a toothbrush and our handwashing frequency is abysmal — few do it often or thoroughly enough, if at all.

Keith Redway, a microbiologist from the University of Westminster, who led the latest investigation into rising grime levels, says that 32 per cent of people don't wash their hands at all and, of those who do, almost 60 per cent use only water. If that's you, Redway warns that your hands are likely to be about as hygienic as a sewer.

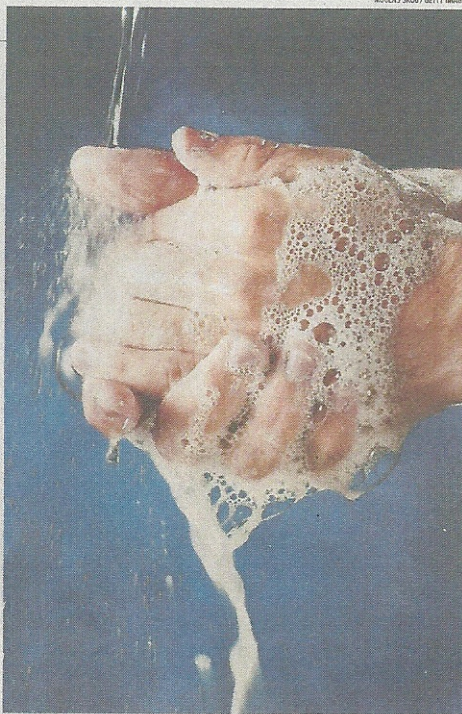
The hands of people tested in the lavatories at busy railway stations were so unsanitary that they could easily spread infection via mobile phones, door handles and anything

found the average pair of poorly washed hands is contaminated with faecal micro-organisms and potential pathogens such as norovirus, *E.coli* and *Clostridium difficile*, he says. "It's not just unpleasant, they can pass on quite nasty illnesses."

In his latest trial, published in *The Journal of Hospital Infection*, Redway and his team demonstrated how easily we can put others at immediate risk. Jet air dryers, he found, blow bacteria from badly washed hands into the atmosphere for the rest of us to absorb and, despite the manufacturers' protestations, were less efficient than paper towels or fabric roller dryers. "The jet air dryer shears liquid off users' hands over a greater distance — up to 1.5 metres — than the other drying methods," Redway says. "They also recorded the greatest spread of microbes into the air."

In a further study, yet to be published, Redway's team has found that viruses lurking on damp hands are propelled twice as far as bacteria by jet-dryers, where they remained in the air for about 15 minutes (viruses can remain active on surfaces for up to 48 hours). "It has huge potential for spreading everything from cold and flu viruses to norovirus and makes our poor hygiene habits even more concerning. Also present on the hands would be micro-organisms of skin origin, including MRSA," he says.

Parents who use hand-dryers should keep children away from the direct air stream so contamination is avoided,



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use the things," he says. "My advice is to stand well clear of anyone who does and to carry a packet of tissues to dry your hands instead."

It's not just our abysmal hand-washing habits that let us down, though. Professor John Oxford, professor of virology at Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry, London, is "highly concerned" by evidence about our filthy lifestyles. Research by hygiene experts from Queen Mary University of London and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine found faecal bacteria on 14 per cent of banknotes and 10 per cent of credit cards in the UK.

A poll by the tissue manufacturer SCA, meanwhile, found that men are as unwashed as women with 41 per cent failing to shower daily and 12 per cent of adults admitting to having "a

surveys show that a fifth of Britons fail to wash their sheets even once a month, that we wash our hair infrequently (a quarter of British women prefer dry shampoos to lathering and rinsing) and that one in five men admit to digging out soiled underwear from the laundry basket if they haven't done any washing.

"Think about the fact that one single bacterium can become eight million bacteria in less than a day," says Oxford. "It's easy to see how quickly things get out of hand."

How should we clean up our act? Oxford says a daily bath or shower isn't necessary, but a thorough daily wash "of the area of the body below the belt" is essential as "many infectious bugs hang around our lower halves". Flannels have gone out of fashion, but are useful as long as they are put in the washing machine afterwards.

Speaking of washing machines, you should wash sheets and bed linen every five to seven days and clothes thoroughly and regularly. Microbial transfer occurs between infected and non-infected dirty clothing and low temperatures might not kill the germs, so the GHC recommends washing towels, soiled children's clothing and sweaty gym gear at 60 degrees or higher (if you prefer a lower temperature, use a laundry disinfectant). Your washing machine can become a reservoir for germs, so run it on empty at a high temperature occasionally to prevent this.

We should also clean hands thoroughly with antibacterial soap for roughly the length of time it takes to sing *Happy Birthday* to You from start to finish. Rub your palms together until the soap is bubbly, rub each palm over the back of the other and rub between the fingers on each hand. Then interlock your fingers and rub again, working the soap around your thumbs. Rub the palms with your fingertips and rinse off soap thoroughly.

Do this at least five times a day — before eating, handling food and applying contact lenses and after using the toilet or changing a nappy, handling pets, coughing or sneezing — and you should be sufficiently germ-free. "That," says Oxford, "kills a virus even if you have just shaken hands with someone from an ebola funeral."