

News

# Use a hand dryer? It may be better not to wash at all

Rubbing hands under hot air increases amount of germs, say scientists

By Laura Roberts

IT is a familiar routine when visiting a public lavatory. After washing your hands, you rub them together under an electric dryer and then, realising your hands are still wet, wipe them on your clothes as you walk out.

Now scientists have claimed that the practice is so unhygienic that it might be better not to wash your hands at all.

Researchers found that bacteria levels increased when hands were rubbed together under electric hot-air dryers.

And the wetter hands were after washing, the more likely they were to spread bacteria.

They concluded that, while electric dryers are more environmentally friendly, using paper towels is the most effective means of reducing the risk of spreading infection after washing.

The problem lies in the fact that bacteria living within the skin is brought to the surface when wet hands are rubbed together. Also, while hand-



Rubbing the hands together under a dryer (left) can bring bacteria to the surface, a study found. Instead, hands should be kept still until dry (right)



washing reduces the amount of bacteria on the surface of the skin, it does not necessarily eliminate them. If hands are still damp then these bacteria are more readily transferred to other surfaces.

Dr Anna Snelling, of Bradford University, said: "Good hand hygiene should include drying hands thoroughly and not just washing.

"The most hygienic method of drying hands is using paper towels or using a hand dryer which doesn't require rubbing your hands together."

The scientists looked at three methods of drying: paper towels, traditional

hand dryers which rely on evaporation and often advise users to rub their hands together, and a new model of hand dryer which rapidly strips water off the hands using high velocity air jets.

Researchers found that bacteria on wet hands, washed without soap, was reduced by up to 48 per cent when using a paper towel and 38 per cent with the new type of dryer.

However, when hands were rubbed together under a traditional dryer the figure varied from a reduction in bacteria of just 1.7 per cent to an increase of up to 18 per cent. Skin naturally contains bacteria called

commensals. Bacteria from other sources such as raw meat can survive on hands and can be transferred to other surfaces, increasing the risk of spreading diseases such as salmonella.

The report, published in the *Journal of Applied Microbiology*, described hand drying as an "essential part of hand washing procedures". It found that a "diverse mixture of bacteria" survived hand-washing.

Dr Snelling said that while the NHS had done extensive research into the best way for staff to wash their hands the advice stopped short of telling them how to dry them.

She added: "For me as a microbiologist, it's a bit of an issue. Drying is the part of the equation that hasn't been focused on."

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has found that hand washing with soap could save around a million lives a year globally, reducing the risk of diarrhoea by about 47 per cent.

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