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health

How to Clean Everything Better

FROM YOUR FINGERNAILS DOWN TO YOUR HARDWOOD FLOORS, HERE ARE THE HEALTHIEST, GENTLEST WAYS TO GIVE DIRT AND GRIME THE ONE-TWO PUNCH. *By Michelle Hainer*

Photo: Augustus Butera, Hair/Makeup: Kyra Dorman/artistbytimothypriano.com, Fashion and prop styling: Amit Gajwani

YOU KNOW IT'S out there: dust, grunge, and grime that set up camp all over your house, on your sponge,

in your handbag, and, yep, even on you. But how the heck do you give dirt and germs the boot in healthy, simple (read: no harsh chemicals) ways? We went to the experts for the lowdown and how-to for gently and effectively getting rid of the ick factor and cleaning up all over. Formerly grimy places: You're in a new state of shine.

YOUR STUFF

TV remote

One of the germiest items in your home, remotes should get a swipe down at least every couple of days with a disinfectant wipe, especially if someone in your house is sick, says Michael Schmidt, PhD, professor and vice chairman of the department of microbiology and immunology at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. And save the channel surfing for after you've cooked your dinner: During food prep, you can easily transfer microbes like E. coli or salmonella to your clicker, which can come back to you when you snack on popcorn in front of the TV later.

Handbag

It goes almost everywhere you do—the ladies' room, the doctor's office—so it's not surprising your bag is a magnet for microbes, such as staph, salmonella, even E. coli. And watch out if you stash loose cash in your bag: "Paper money



is the dirtiest thing in your bag. The flu virus can live on bank notes for 17 days," Schmidt says. (Coins that are made from copper, an antimicrobial, are surprisingly clean.) Always keep money in your wallet, and if you pack a snack like freshly washed fruit, make sure to seal it in a plastic bag to prevent germs, which love damp places, from attacking it. To clean

the inside of your bag, vacuum using the crevice attachment, or use a long bristled suede brush to dump crumbs into the garbage can.

And how about that dirty outside of your bag? Get into the habit of hanging it up versus plopping it down on restaurant or bathroom floors, to avoid picking up germs. Clear the dirt and dust off a leather bag

CLEAN-IT CALENDAR

How often should you ...

- **Swap your bath towel for a fresh one?** Every two to three days is ideal, and always hang them up to dry to prevent the growth of bacteria. Wash in hot water.
- **Wash your sheets?** We shed up to 2 million skin cells an hour, even while we're sleeping, so launder sheets and pillow cases once a week in hot water, then dry on the hottest setting. Wash your pillows every six months and your comforter every couple of months.
- **Replace your toothbrush?** Get a new one monthly (plus any time you've been sick). And to keep germs away, rinse your toothbrush under the hottest water possible after each use and stand up to dry.
- **Buy new sponges and/or scrub brushes?** Replace sponges once a month and scrub brushes every three to six months.

Photo: Augustus Butera, Hair/Makeup: Kyra Dorman/artistbytimothyplano.com, Fashion and prop styling: Amit Gajwani, Clothing: Boden cardigan (\$36; bodenusa.com), Charlotte Russe jeans (\$30; charlotterusse.com)

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ARM YOURSELF

Try these fab Earth-friendly cleaners.



Swab down commonly touched surfaces with **Seventh Generation Disinfecting Wipes** (\$6; seventhgeneration.com). They kill more than 99.99 percent of germs like salmonella and viruses like the flu.

Wipe up crumbs and sticky spills with **Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day Counter Top Spray in Basil** (\$4; Whole Foods), which has the strength of an all-purpose cleaner, plus vegetable protein extract to cut kitchen odors.



Spray away bathroom grime with spearmint-scented **Method Antibacterial Bathroom Cleaner** (\$4; Target), which kills 99.9 percent of germs, thanks to planet-friendly ingredients like naturally antibacterial thyme and other essential oils.



Green Works naturally derived laundry detergent in lavender (also available in free & clear, \$7 for 45 ounces; stores nationwide) is floral and fresh, and leaves clothes feeling soft without harsh chemicals.



Keep floors, cupboards, and appliances gleaming with the plant-based, concentrated **Caldrea Essential Collection for Target All-Purpose Cleaner in Herbs of Provence** (\$10; Target).

by applying a leather conditioner once a week. If stains remain, use a leather cleaner or mix a capful of dish soap with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water, and wipe the bag with the mixture using a white paper towel or terry cloth. (The soap-and-water treatment also works for cleaning canvas bags.) Rinse the soap off thoroughly, stuff the bag with towels to retain its shape, let air-dry, and follow up with a leather conditioner, says Daniel Pegnato, master leathersmith at Fortuna's Shoe and Luggage Repair in Bethesda, Maryland. As for pen marks? "Ink is a dye, and it soaks into the leather,

becoming a part of it," he says. Take the bag to a leather professional rather than trying to clean it yourself, or you might remove your bag's original color. To avoid stains in the first place, carry pens in a sealed plastic bag or case in your purse.

Lingerie

Here's a fun fact about your unmentionables: "Every pair of dirty underwear has traces of feces," says Kelly Reynolds, PhD, environmental microbiologist at the University of Arizona—and that can mean E. coli and other bacteria

are in there, too. *Eww*. To kill germs and keep 'em from spreading to other clothes, wash your underwear separately from the rest of your laundry on the highest temperature possible, not in cold—many germs survive in cold water, Reynolds says. Dry until the load is fully dry; wet or damp laundry provides a perfect environment for bacteria growth. As for your bras, it's OK to get two or three wears before laundering, says Gwen Whiting, co-founder of The Laundress, a line of delicate detergents and soaps. But on days when you work up a sweat, even just from a few nerves over that big presentation, don't be tempted to simply let your bra air out and wear it again. For maximum microbe fighting, wash it as Reynolds advises above. But if you'd rather brave a few germs in exchange for your most fragile lacy, padded bra lasting longer, hand wash it with a mild detergent and let air dry. (The heat and tumbling of the washer and dryer can damage the fabric, underwire, and padding of bras over time.)



Yoga mat

When you're relaxing into Downward Dog, the last thing you want to worry about is a mucky mat inches below you. But your mat, like your handbag, is a natural magnet for germs and crud on the floor beneath it, not to mention bacteria from your feet, hands, and sweat as you strike those poses. How to have a healthier



THE 5 GERMIEST PLACES IN YOUR LIFE

Think the germiest place you'll ever encounter is a public toilet? Think again. In one study, "80 percent of the grocery carts we sampled had *E. coli*," says Charles Gerba, PhD, professor of environmental microbiology at the University of Arizona—and they're not the only microbe magnets. Here, Gerba's list of the top five most germ-filled places in your world—and the best way to clean them.

1. Phones. "Cell phones carry 500 times more bacteria than a toilet seat," says Kelly Reynolds, PhD, another professor of environmental microbiology at the

University of Arizona. Many disease-causing microbes can survive for weeks on your rarely cleaned office or cell phone. Swipe with a disinfecting wipe daily.

2. Soap dispensers. Ironically, this germ-fighting tool is a hot spot for *E. coli* and other fecal bacteria. But if you wash your hands properly, lathering for as long as it takes to sing one round of "Happy Birthday," you'll get rid of bugs.

3. Your keyboard and mouse. Your co-worker's germs can linger on your computer longer than the virus she accidentally e-mailed last week. "The rhinovirus, which causes the common cold, can survive for hours to days on surfaces like keyboards," Reynolds says. Wipe these tech accessories down weekly with a disinfectant, even if you're the only one who uses your computer, since your own fingers have probably touched their fair share of ick.

4. Lobby-level elevator buttons. These little knobs are teeming with your neighbors' and co-workers' germs. Wait for someone else to press the button, or use your knuckle, then apply hand sanitizer.

5. Shopping cart handles. Since up to 8 in 10 may have *E. coli*, take advantage of free disinfectant wipes at the store or use hand sanitizer after shopping.

—Caroline Steller

inhale when you're facedown? Make sure you always put the same side of the mat down on the floor, Schmidt says; get one with different colors or patterns on top and bottom so it's easy to remember which side to use. And just to be safe, give it a scrub with good old dish soap and hot water after every couple of uses, says Linda Cobb, author of *Talking Dirty With the Queen of Clean*. No time to disinfect? Simply hang your mat outside on a sunny day. "Sunlight is a great sterilizer," Schmidt says. If you're borrowing a mat, give it a quick swipe with an antibacterial wipe (many gyms and studios keep them on hand beside the borrowable mats)—and let it dry before getting your om on.

YOUR BODY

Face

Whenever you touch your mug, you transfer all the germs you've encountered in your day (from door handles, elevator buttons, other people's hands) to it, says Miami-based dermatologist Heather Woolery-Lloyd, MD. But that doesn't mean you should attack your skin with maximum cleaning firepower: Excess washing and scrubbing causes irritation and redness, which, if extreme, can break down your skin's natural barriers, making it easier for germs to get in, Dr. Woolery-Lloyd says. "If you have sensitive skin, avoid products that contain sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS).

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This is what makes them foamy, but it can be very harsh and irritating to skin," she explains. To keep your face healthy and fresh, opt for a creamy, SLS-free cleanser, such as Cerave Hydrating Cleanser (\$13; drugstore.com) or Eau Thermale Avene Gentle Milk Cleanser (\$18; drugstore.com). Cleanse once daily, unless your skin is especially oily, and skip the washcloth. Instead, apply the cleanser in a circular motion with your fingertips, then rinse with warm, not hot, water.

Nails

You know to wash hands often (especially this time of year), but you may not realize you need to scrub under your nails, too. Germs like staphylococcus and streptococcus can lurk there, as well as bacteria that can end up giving you a bout of diarrhea in the loo, research from Aston University in Birmingham, England, found. Washing your hands helps, but to keep nails really clean, you'll need "a little bit of elbow grease," says celebrity nail stylist Jenna Hipp, using a nailbrush or toothbrush and antibacterial soap daily to get the grime out. To gently brighten nails, mix 1 tablespoon hydrogen peroxide (a natural germ-killer) with 3 tablespoons baking soda, and apply underneath and on top of nails as needed with a cotton swab, letting sit for three to five minutes. Rinse with warm water, and smooth on hand lotion and cuticle oil to moisturize.

YOUR DIGS

Wood floors

Whatever you've walked through in your shoes all day, you can guarantee it'll also be on your floor once you're at home, says Larry Weiss, MD, the co-founder and chief scientist behind CleanWell, a line of eco-friendly soaps and hand sanitizers. To help keep the grime at bay, enlist a no-shoes-in-the-house rule, he suggests. As for cleaning, unless your floor's manufacturer recommends a specific product, you can gently kill germs

with vinegar, a natural disinfectant. To use it, mix 2 tablespoons of distilled white vinegar with 1 quart of hot water. The key to protecting wood floors from warping: Use the mixture in a spray bottle, lightly spritzing a 100 percent cotton terry cloth towel (or a terry cloth mop head) until it's just damp, then wiping the floor and respraying as needed, says Mary Findley, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Green Cleaning*. Don't slop the water onto the floor from a bucket, because the water will work itself between the floor boards and warp them, she says. After your spritz treatment, the floor will dry almost instantly. Plus, "the acid in vinegar



helps prevent water spots," she says. If you do choose to use a commercial floor-cleaning product, read the label to make sure it's safe on wood.

Sponges and scrub brushes

"If you let your sponge sit out wet all night, it'll have all sorts of bacteria growing on it," Dr. Weiss says. In fact, these cleaning aids are the most contaminated sites for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), *E. coli*, mold, and general

PANTRY POWER

Keep these ingredients on hand for a super-natural clean.

- **Baking soda.** Use it to remove marks from hard surfaces and deodorize your fridge. Or make it into a paste with hydrogen peroxide— $\frac{1}{3}$ cup soda to $\frac{2}{3}$ cup peroxide—to remove underarm stains from white clothing.
- **Lemon juice.** Mix with cream of tartar until you have a paste, and scrub into rust stains on bathtubs (leave it on for a few hours until you see the stain disappear). Or cut a lemon in half, sprinkle it with salt, and use it to clean cutting boards and bring shine back to copper pots and pans.
- **White vinegar.** A natural acidic cleaner, white vinegar rivals the disinfecting power of bleach. Mix equal parts vinegar and water to clean mirrors. Just dip a cloth in the mixture, wipe surface, and buff dry.
- **Rubbing alcohol.** Dilute it with a 50-50 mix of water to wipe down remotes and remove fingerprints on appliances, including stainless.

bacteria in your entire home, Reynolds says. To safe up your scrubbers and sponges, clean them on the top rack of the dishwasher for the full cycle every time you run it (pop them in along with your dishes—the detergent and heat take care of the ick). Or microwave a slightly damp sponge (douse it with white vinegar or lemon juice, then rinse and wring out) on high for two to three minutes and allow to air dry, Cobb says.

Ice bin

While germs can't live in your freezer, ice has an annoying habit of taking on funky food odors, so unless you want your iced tea to smell faintly of frozen pizza, dump it out at least once a month. To clean the empty bin, fill it with warm water and $\frac{1}{3}$ cup white vinegar, and let it sit on the counter for a few hours. Rinse, then sprinkle with baking soda and wipe down to neutralize odors. *Ahh*, now that smells better.

—Additional reporting by Leslie Barrie, Melanie Rud, and Caroline Steller