

Protect yourself from germs

Ideally, we all know the best way to keep yourself healthy is to avoid all contact with germs. This was the idea behind Howard Hughes' eccentric lifestyle to avoiding all contact with others in his later life. Obviously, this is not realistic.

That means you will be exposed to sick people who spread germs by coughing, sneezing or breathing tiny droplets into the air. These droplets contain the germs that make us sick. The germs enter our bodies through the mouth or the nose by inhaling them, or by touching a contaminated surface and then touching the face.

Whether or not you actually get sick from the exposure to these germs depends upon how hardy your immune system is. If you expose 100 people to the same cold germs, only about 20 come down with the cold.

You can boost your immune system throughout the year by eating a nutritious diet, getting the proper rest and regular exercise. It is also important to avoid alcohol, tobacco and recreational drugs, as they tear down the body.

Unfortunately for travelers, public transportation such as trains, buses, and airplanes are great places to pick up an illness such as a cold or the flu. A well ventilated area that circulates all or mostly fresh air such as a train presents a much lower risk than an enclosed vehicle such as an airplane, which uses mostly recycled air.

When riding on a train or bus, sit next to a window that can be cracked open. Airplanes pose the greatest risk since they are enclosed and re-circulate at least 50% of the same air throughout the flight. Years ago airplane circulated 100% fresh air, but when deregulation occurred in the 1980s, airlines reduced costs by circulating 50% or less of fresh air.

Since you can't open a window, your only defense is to keep your mucous membranes from drying out. Because of the low humidity on a plane, your lips, nasal membranes, throat and mouth tissues tend to dry and crack. Viruses easily enter your body through those cracks so keep these areas moist to increase protection.

Spray a non-prescription saline nasal wash such as Ocean or NaSal into your nostrils whenever they feel dry during flight. Keep your body well hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids, preferably water or juice. Alcohol and carbonated beverages will promote dehydration and should be avoided.

Germs such as the influenza virus can live for several hours on a dry hard surface. If you must touch these surfaces, spray or wipe them with a disinfectant or alcohol and then dry it with a disposable cloth or tissue. Immediately throw away the cloth, being careful not to touch the cleaning side.

Public telephones are especially good places to pick up someone else's cold or flu bug. Use a disposable tissue to hold and cover the mouthpiece to avoid direct contact with it. Again, throw the tissue away immediately and avoid touching the contaminated side.

Better yet, use your own personal cell phone and avoid contact altogether. A tissue covered finger can also be used for ATM machines.

Finally, good hygiene is an excellent weapon against illness. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with hot soapy water any time you are out in public and always keep your hands away from your face. Purel or GermX (commercially prepared, no-rinse disinfectants) makes a small, travel-sized container for ease of use and convenience. Keeping this with you (and using it generously) at all times will significantly reduce the spreading of germs.