



HEALTH

KEYING IN ON GERMS

THE SURFACES OF PUBLIC COMPUTER KEYBOARDS HARBOR HUNDREDS OF GERMS AND BACTERIA. ICK!

// KIRSTEN HUDSON

Ever awkwardly tried to open a door with your sleeve as a barrier against that dirty doorknob? Or done the tricky dance of attempting to flush the toilet with your foot to avoid that germ-laden handle?

Despite your dances to avoid seemingly obvious germ hang-outs, the dirtiest surface in your life may be something you touch every day — and it's not in the bathroom.

BACTERIA CAFETERIA

Desk areas can conceal more creepy crawlers than public restrooms. Public computer keyboards contain 100 times more bacteria than the average toilet seat, says Chuck Gerba, professor of microbiology at the University of Arizona.

Leftover food particles from that sandwich you ate while watching YouTube on your lunch break and other gunk that accumulates in the cracks of keyboards feed more than just the cockroaches — bacteria find plenty to munch on. "They're basically a bacteria cafeteria," Gerba says of keyboards.

If you turn over that keyboard you're typing on, you might be surprised — and grossed out — at what you find. And the grossness can depend on the location. "If you flip over a keyboard in New York, you'll get a bagel-flake snowstorm," Gerba says.

GROSSED OUT

Sitting at the circulation desk in Watson Library, Jessica Huff, Mayetta sophomore and student desk assistant, has a good view of the public computers. What she sees happening there will make your toes curl.

"I've been in the bathroom and watched people not wash their hands then walk out and log in on a computer," she says. That's not all the grossness, though. She's seen students sneeze and cough into their hands and chew their fingernails while using the computer. "What's really gross is when someone eats at a computer right after the person before them sneezed all over it," she says.

Chelsea Jacobsen, Chicago sophomore, says she thinks keyboards are probably one of the dirtiest surfaces on campus. "One time I saw a guy licking peanut butter off of his fingers then continue typing," she says. "It was gross."

And the last user's saliva isn't the only bodily substance sticking to keyboards. "The guy that was just sitting next to me was scratching himself in inappropriate places then touching the keyboard. It was disgusting," says Leah Kirkland, Olathe senior.

Some accumulation of germs seems natural when you consider the fact that tons of KU students use the computer workstations every day. In Fall 2008 the 149 computers at Anschutz Library had 1,256 average daily log-ins — that's about eight students per computer per day. The computers at Watson Library and Harris Computer Lab in the Kansas Union had about six students per day and the computers at Budig Computer lab had about four. That's a lot of grimy fingers.

KEEP IT CLEAN

As high-touch areas, keyboards easily transfer viruses. Viruses that cause the flu, colds and even diarrhea can prowl on the surfaces of keyboards, Gerba says. Bacteria can live on keyboards longer than viruses but viruses will remain active for several hours, even up to a day, says Jack Brown, professor emeritus of molecular biosciences.

According to the Mayo Clinic, flu viruses stick to keyboards through the drops of fluid that fly out when someone coughs or sneezes. You can then catch the viruses by touching the surface of the keyboard and then rubbing your eyes, scratching your nose or touching your mouth.

The easiest way to keep from transferring any type of virus or bacteria from a keyboard is just to keep your hands off your face, Brown says. "It's a difficult thing for humans to do but it's the best thing you can do," he says.

You could also give that keyboard a swipe with an antibacterial wipe, Gerba says. The public keyboards and computers at the University go through a thorough cleaning during each semester break, says Karen Nicholas, communications and public relations manager for information technology. But that still leaves an entire semester's worth of grime accumulating on them.

For now, to keep yourself from passing along more than just information as you use public keyboards, try to keep your germs to yourself.



Photo illustration by Kirsten Hudson

The keys to infection: Public computer keyboards contain 100 times more bacteria than the average toilet seat.

Guys take the gold when it comes to desk cleanliness. In a 2006 study of 113 private offices and cubicles at 17 different sites, Chuck Gerba, professor of microbiology at the University of Arizona, found that bacteria levels in women's offices were nearly three times higher than in men's. Keyboards, computer mice and phones in women's offices harbored nearly five times more bacteria per square inch than in men's offices. Way to keep it clean, boys!

	WOMEN	MEN
TELEPHONE	+	
KEYBOARD	+	
MOUSE	+	
DESK SURFACE		+
EXCLAMATION KEY	+	
PENS	+	
		+ = MOST GERMY

WHAT ARE THE DIRTIEST KEYS ON THE KEYBOARD?

Your pinkies and the middle finger on your left hand might be pretty germey because the "A," "E" and "Enter" keys are the most unsanitary keys on the keyboard. "These are high contamination areas because they're used the most often," says Chuck Gerba, professor of microbiology at The University of Arizona.

Also watch out for that computer mouse you're clicking on. It contains high levels of germs because you place your whole palm on it, which transfers more bacteria, Gerba says.