

You Call This Clean?

YOU EXPECT SOME SPOTS TO BE FILTHY—YOUR KITCHEN FLOOR, YOUR GARBAGE CAN, YOUR TOILET. BUT HOW GERMY ARE THE THINGS DESIGNED TO KEEP YOU AND YOUR HOME CLEAN?

WASHING MACHINE

Even if your drawers are free of skid marks—please, guys—trace amounts of feces still cling to your dirty underwear, says Charles Gerba, Ph.D., a microbiologist at the University of Arizona. "If you wash a load of undergarments, you transfer about 500 million *E. coli* bacteria to the machine." This can contaminate other clothing items, which may harbor germs of their own. **Stay clean** Wash most whites first, and use chlorine bleach. "It sanitizes the machine," Gerba says. Then dedicate a load to underwear, using hot water (150°F) and a color-safe bleach substitute. Once a month, run an empty cycle with bleach to wipe out any lingering germs. This is especially important for front-loading machines; water tends to settle in the bottom of these machines, allowing bacteria to proliferate, Gerba says.

DISHWASHER

Crusty scrambled eggs = bacterial breakfast. "When you allow dishes to accumulate for a few days, growth of bacteria invariably increases," says Philip Tierno Jr., Ph.D., director of microbiology and immunology at NYU's Langone Medical Center and the author of *The Secret Life of Germs*. "And even if you can't see it, there is viable foodstuff in the rinse water to feed them." Plus, the dishwasher's door gasket may be contaminated with fungus and black yeast. "That outer rim never reaches a temperature high enough to kill everything off." **Stay clean** If you don't plan on running a load soon, rinse your plates with a mild bleach solution (a shot glass of bleach to a half quart of water). This kills surface organisms so you can let dishes accumulate, Tierno says. Use the same solution to periodically clean the gasket.

TOOTHBRUSH

A 2011 study in *Microscopy Research and Technique* found that nearly half of never-before-used brushes were tainted with bacteria. It gets worse when you put the bristles to work. "Your mouth contains more than 500 different types of bacteria," Tierno says. And if you leave your brush sitting out, it could collect fecal bacteria. "Unless you have a low-flow toilet, aerosolized droplets splatter when you flush. They can go pretty far—up to 20 feet." Yum! **Stay clean** Regularly run your toothbrush through a clean dishwasher, using standard dish detergent. A 2011 study in the *American Journal of Dentistry* found that this method eradicated nearly all disease-causing bacteria. Another option is to soak your brush in a mouthwash that contains cetylpyridinium chloride, such as Crest Pro-Health

Complete Rinse, for 20 minutes; doing this can also beat bacteria, the study found. To avoid flying feces, Tierno says, simply store your brush in a closed cabinet.

SPONGE

"The sink is the dirtiest area in the kitchen," Tierno says, "and the sponge is the dirtiest item in the sink." In a recent Simmons College study, nearly a third of dishcloths and kitchen sponges tested were laden with staph (including some with MRSA, the antibiotic-resistant strain of staph)—twice the rate of contamination in toilet bowls the researchers swabbed. **Stay clean** Throw your wet sponges into the microwave and zap them on high for 1 minute. —LAURA ROBERSON

When the Sheet Hits the Man

Germ-ridden linens need your attention, too

BEDSHEETS

CLEAN ONCE A WEEK Wash sheets in hot water and a splash of bleach. If they're colored, use a product that contains peroxides, such as Clorox 2 Stain Fighter & Color Booster.

TOWELS

EVERY 1 TO 3 DAYS Wash 'em like sheets: hot water, hot dryer. Most vegetative bacteria die if you hang towels in a dry climate, so never leave them in a damp pile. In dry months, you can get away with fresh towels every 3 days or so.



Travis Stork, M.D., is an ER physician and host of TV's *The Doctors*.

THE WORLD OF HURT by Travis Stork, M.D.

Q I recently witnessed a car crash and can't stop thinking about it. How do you move on when you've seen something awful? *Franco, San Diego, CA*

I've always felt that dialogue is a big help in reducing these symptoms. Talking to someone close to you about what happened can help you process the event and move past it. I've seen some truly tragic things in the ER over the years, and I always spend a few

nights ruminating on them before I begin to move past them. That's human nature. But if the experience doesn't gradually fade over time, and if it affects your day-to-day life and sleep, you could be looking at post-traumatic stress disorder. Don't let it go unattended.

HOW DO YOU KEEP HYSTERICAL PEOPLE CALM IN A CRISIS (WITHOUT SLAPPING THEM)?

Robert, Yonkers, NY I often deal with hysterical people in the ER, some due to mental illness, others due to horrible circumstances. The one thing you should never do is match their hysteria. Just take control and be a leader, using a calm, rational voice in quiet surroundings. One caveat: In the case of someone with a mental illness, you need a pro's help.