



Avoid making germs your travel partner

From the airport check-in to the plane to your hotel room, 'Today' consumer correspondent Janice Lieberman uncovers the hidden bacteria

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Updated: 7:14 a.m. ET Oct 16, 2006

Getting ready to book your holiday travel? The thought of getting away for some R&R sounds enticing. So why is it that oftentimes you come home from your well-deserved vacation sicker and more tired than you when you left? It could be those late night margaritas or it could be that your journey is making you ill.

We decided to take a trip with environmental scientist Connie Morbach of Sanit Air in Troy, Mich., to see why flying and hotels sometimes make us cough, sneeze or come down with stomach ailments.

Our mission was to uncover the possible germs, mold and bacteria at the airport, on board the plane and at the hotel. Armed with our camera, swabs, test tubes and Petri dishes we were on our way. After Sanit-Air collected the samples, they were sent to T. Baker & Associates in Flint, Michigan for testing. The results were shocking.

First stop: the check-in monitor. A swab of the kiosk revealed lots of bacteria and some mold. Morbach also found penicillium, which can cause allergic reactions. This mold was not life threatening, but if you are prone to rashes and allergies, wipe the monitor off before you touch it.

Ok so you've got your ticket, now it's time for security. Since 9/11 seasoned travelers have gotten used to the idea that shoes must come off. Our advice? Wear socks or bring some with you. Don't walk barefoot. We found staphylococcus there, which is a human pathogen and may be of concern. It's like walking on a gym floor or outside on the street — dirty shoes drag in germs. And if you had an open wound, you could develop an infection.

Time to board. We tested the air on one plane, going one way. We sampled the air coming out of two nozzles. One yielded two different types of mold, one in the yeast family. Morbach says the quantities she found were way too high suggesting the ventilation system was in need of a good cleaning or the filtration system needed to be improved. The second nozzle also had bacteria, but not as bad. Overall, the plane was dusty and the air vents were dirty. It's no wonder all that recirculated air causes some passengers to get sick. Morbach says the newer planes have HEPA filters which can filter out over 99% of mold and bacteria out of the air. So if you are susceptible to allergies, try to find out if the plane is new. Also stay home if you are sick, and if someone is coughing next to you, try to turn your head or ask to change your seat.

The Air Transport Association, which represents domestic airlines, disagrees with our findings. "Airplanes have fewer airborne contaminants than office buildings or other public spaces because of their advanced ventilation systems using hospital-grade HEPA filters."

Ready for hotel check-in? We tested two hotel chains — one inexpensive, one more pricey. The cheaper one had water stains on the ceiling, peeling wallpaper in the bathroom and crumbled dry wall. No surprise there. We found staccibotrous (PH), which is a mold that can cause respiratory problems and we found insect droppings in the same area. Grossed out yet? We also found fecal-related bacteria on the comforter and other bacteria that can cause diarrhea and stomach ailments.

The hotel didn't disagree. They did tell us they recently acquired the property and intend to remodel.

The more expensive hotel looked great but also had problems. The air conditioning vent showed organisms related to pneumonia. The decorative sash on the bed was full of penicillium mold, which can trigger allergic reactions. That hotel chain appreciated hearing of our findings and said they would look into the problem immediately.

So before you cancel your reservations, our tip is to take a look around the room. If it doesn't smell fresh or you see water stains on the ceiling, ask for a different room or find a different hotel.

The good news is most people who are not immune deficient have wonderful times on trips and at worse come home with nothing worse than sniffles.

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