



PRINT THIS

Powered by

Is your desk making you sick?

By David Williams
CNN

(CNN) -- In the peak of cold and flu season, many Americans may want to hide at their desks to avoid those hacking and sneezing co-workers. But health experts say that could be the very place that makes them sick.

A study by the University of Arizona in 2002 found the typical worker's desk has hundreds of times more bacteria per square inch than an office toilet seat. If that's not disturbing enough, desks, phones and other private surfaces are also prime habitats for the viruses that cause colds and flu.

Bacteria, single-celled organisms, can cause strep throat, pneumonia and other conditions. They can be treated with antibiotics. However, viruses, which are smaller than bacteria, cause colds and flu and cannot be treated with antibiotics.

Dr. Charles Gerba, a microbiologist at the University of Arizona, counted bacteria on workplace surfaces for a study sponsored by The Clorox Co., makers of Clorox bleach.

Office toilet seats had 49 germs per square inch, he found. But desktops had almost 21,000 germs per square inch. Phones were worse -- more than 25,000 germs per square inch.

Desks, phones, computer keyboards and mice are key germ transfer points because people touch them so often, Gerba said, adding that coughing and sneezing can leave behind "a minefield of viruses" that can live on a surface for up to three days. But health experts say that simple office hygiene can reduce infection risks dramatically.

"We know that 80 percent of the infections you get are transmitted through the environment," Gerba said.

Bacteria cafeteria

Wiping down work areas with disinfectant wipes every day reduces bacteria significantly, Gerba said.

But at many offices, custodians don't touch people's desks to avoid accidental misplacement or loss of important documents.

"Nobody ever cleans a desktop until they start sticking to it, from what we've found," he said. "A lot of people eat and slop on their desks all the time so it basically turns into a bacteria cafeteria during the day, and that's one of the reasons you get a lot on your desktops."

Roslyn Stone, chairwoman of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Workplace Flu Prevention Group, had another low-tech recommendation -- washing your hands.

"Soap and hot water for 18 to 20 seconds as frequently as you can remember to do it is going to be your single most effective prevention tip this season," she said.

Stone also urged people not to go to work if they're sick to avoid spreading the disease to their co-workers.

However, she acknowledged that it can be hard to stay home since the peak flu months are December and January -- the busiest time of year for retailers and a time when many workers have either used all their sick time or are rationing it to last through the New Year.

Lori Rosen, a workplace analyst with CCH Incorporated, recommended that companies put together guidelines to tell their employees when to stay home and when it is OK to come to work.

"Sometimes people don't know, and even though they know when they should keep their kids home from school, they don't know that about themselves because they think, 'Well, I'm an adult I can deal with it differently,' but in fact it probably isn't," she said.

Stone said a basic guideline would be for workers to stay home until they are free of symptoms -- fever, sore throat, nausea or diarrhea -- for at least 24 hours.

Flu costs

Workers in the United States miss an average of 1.5 days per year because of the flu and that could cost businesses \$20 billion in lost productivity this year, said Harvard University health economist David Cutler.

He said the shortage of vaccine could make the problem larger than most years.

"There's this hero thing that people think 'If I can get myself dressed in some manner and drag myself -- even if somebody has to drive me -- to the office, I'll go in,'" Rosen said.

Dr. Ron Goetzel, director of the Cornell Institute for Health and Productivity Studies, said that this sort of "presenteeism" puts other workers at risk and also hurts companies' bottom lines.

"The employer is paying you to come in and work," he said " and ... you're suffering from a condition that knocks off two out of 8 hours of the day. In a sense the employer is paying you for a full day of work but you're only delivering 75 percent of that."

Find this article at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2004/HEALTH/12/13/cold.flu.desk/index.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

