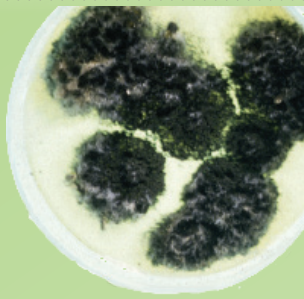


Are you “petri-fied” of germs? When is it okay to be afraid?



The world is a petri dish, but microorganisms are a normal part of life. Germaphobia (scientifically called mysophobia) is an irrational fear of microorganisms and germs. But there is no need to fear! Simply understanding the diverse world of microbes—the good guys and the bad guys—can help you understand when risks are more or less serious. Here are some common concerns about germs.

Concern: If you can’t see germs, how can you avoid them?

Response: Often times, you can’t. But don’t let this get to you—your immune system is designed to keep you healthy and to help you get better when you do get sick. It is impossible to avoid all microorganisms, but you can be careful around certain “hot spots” of germ activity. These include places that many people touch—like doorknobs and pencil sharpeners—and places that get high concentrations of germs—like water bottle tips, tubes of lip balm, and tissue boxes.

Concern: Someone threw up on the playground. What should I do?

Response: There are lots of reasons that kids throw up, but regardless of the reason, all bodily fluids contain massive amounts of germs and microbes, so it is best to leave cleanup to a professional. Tell a teacher right away. The teacher will get a custodian who will use a special “body fluids cleanup” kit.



Concern: I ate a snack without washing my hands. Am I going to get sick?

Response: Maybe. You just ate lots of microorganisms, so it depends on what kind they were. Many germs are destroyed by saliva and stomach acid, but sometimes the bad ones still make it through. Don’t be terrified—if you do get sick it will usually only be a few days of feeling icky—but you should definitely remember to wash up next time!

Concern: I like to push the cart at the grocery store, but I have heard there are germs on the handle.

Response: Many grocery stores offer disinfecting wipes near the front door to clean carts. Offer to wipe the cart down and then promise to wash your hands before you eat... and then maybe your mom will change her mind.

Concern: I love yogurt, but the container says there are “live cultures” in it. What does that mean?

Response: Remember that not all bacteria are bad. Some don’t do anything to humans, and some are actually good for us! The bacteria that grow in yogurt, called lactic acid bacteria, are an example of good bacteria. They turn liquid milk into tart, creamy yogurt, which preserves the milk for a longer period of time and also turns the lactose (a sugar in milk which some people can’t digest) into lactic acid, which is easier to digest and gives yogurt that delicious tart flavor.

