

It doesn't have to be on the germs' terms

So, I'm at work and starting to resemble an extra for *Night of the Living Dead*. I've just completed my routine self-diagnosis and scanning the office I see, thanks to me perhaps, an assortment of my colleagues sniffing and coughing. My desk is gradually sinking between dripping drifts of used tissues and I can't answer the phone for fear of permanently alienating a vital business contact with my erratic nasal sounds.

I am only half ill, and although I have been doing a decent impression of a person with an impending cold, I have a friend who currently has an unspeakable substance pouring from his head – a cold that has turned into what a trained medical professional would describe as “one hell of an ear infection”. Let's forget, just for a second, hosing down hospitals; if you want to fight infection then the battle commences in the office.

The average office hosts hundreds of times more bacteria than a toilet seat. Yes, I said a toilet seat. As we all sit here, stewing in our own putrescence while the army of microbes have us at their mercy, they are also throwing meet-and-greet parties all over our office. Parties that we're not invited to and are monumental in size.

To put their banquet in perspective, around 21,000 germs per square inch are found on work desks. A population that is hard to quantify when you consider the size of a desk. We are constantly and unintentionally adding to this community with the 1,500 germs per square centimetre that congregate on our hands.

Dr. Chuck Gerba, a renowned microbiologist from the University of Arizona, is a leading expert on home and work hygiene. “Clutter doesn't necessarily mean a lot of germs,” he says. “To a large degree it's the amount of activity and the number of people that occupy an office.”

Here's the controversial bit: women spread more germs in the work place than men, according to Gerba. But, before there is unanimous uproar, the higher germ concentration is proof that women have healthier diets than men. “Women tend to store apples, bananas and other biodegradable, healthy food at their desk,” he continues. “Men appear to opt for less nutritious provisions at work, such as gum and crisps.”

Over the last two years, Gerba and his team placed a normal office environment under their microscope and the results were astonishing to say the least. The office, in Arizona, consisted of 15 employees, each with their own desk, a communal kitchen and two separate toilets. Gerba found hundreds of thousands of bacteria on 'hot spots' such as a printer button, a mouse and, in even larger amounts, keyboards.

“Among the bacteria we found coliform – intestinal bacteria generally found in human waste – on bathroom handles, in the kitchen sink and on several keyboards,” says Gerba. “This indicated that people were not washing their hands after leaving the bathroom. But, surprisingly, the desks that were cluttered hosted the least bacteria. The proud, office clean freaks generally had a filthy keyboard.”

Elizabeth Scott, a professor at the Simmons Centre for Hygiene and Health in Boston, adds: “Office workers touch their hands to their faces on average 18 times an hour. When we touch our faces, we bring all the collected gunk of our desktop or keyboard directly to our respiratory and digestive system every three and half minutes. Bacteria and viruses couldn’t ask for a better transportation network.”

So, germs could be regarded as the consummate commuter. Unlike most humans, they enjoy travelling in dense crowds, over long distances and once they get to their destination they live in complete harmony; celebrating their arrival with a veritable feast – our office.

We do make their trip easy for them though. Around 71% of office workers believe their workspace makes them regularly ill, with ‘hot desking’ being a major culprit for spreading bacteria and bugs. What’s more, 80% admitted to sharing their workstations, including telephone and computer, while being ill. The migration of the germ has just been upgraded to a free, first class ticket to paradise.

While most of the bacteria that lurks and thrives at our workplace aren’t life-threatening, it does explain why we can feel, well, under the weather sometimes. We can disinfect our desks and office equipment as frequently as time allows us to. The battle to conquer germ domination may be ending, but the war is just beginning.

One way to guarantee the office remains a defiant ‘no germ zone’ is to contact a commercial cleaning company. Albany Facilities is one of the leading office hygiene specialists in the UK who know how to tackle our office organisms.

“Most people have heard of ‘sick building syndrome’ but don’t realise the impact it can have on a business,” says Albany’s MD, Mike Burton. “The term describes a range of symptoms that office workers suffer from including headaches, fatigue, difficulty concentrating and respiratory problems. High levels of bacteria and fungi in air ventilation systems could be to blame so companies should ensure that air ducts are regularly deep cleaned.

“A free compliance survey can help companies manage their risk and ensure both their staff – and their profits – remain healthy.”

The next time you're sat in front of your desk, devouring your lunch that you've been looking forward to all morning, remember one thing: you are the oblivious host to the biggest dinner party of your life!

Matthew Crick