# How to use public restrooms safely according to hygiene experts



Many individuals harbour a deep-rooted aversion to public restrooms, with a recent survey revealing that nearly 80% of respondents would only consider using one if absolutely necessary. This apprehension is not unfounded, as bacteria like E. coli and salmonella, known for causing severe gastrointestinal issues, can survive on hard surfaces for extended periods—sometimes days. In addition, viruses related to colds and flu can persist for up to 24 hours.

Dr Lisa Ackerley, an environmental health expert and scientific advisor to the International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene, highlights the high foot traffic in public toilets as a significant factor in germ transmission. "Public loos often involve a lot of people in a confined space performing bodily functions, so there’s plenty of potential for the spreading of germs from one place to another," she explains.

However, it's worth noting that cleanliness can often be deceiving. Dr Ackerley’s research indicates that many public toilets may be cleaner than their appearance suggests. "Through the course of my work, I have swabbed public toilets and often they can be clean, but just appear not to be so because people leave rubbish such as paper or empty bottles behind," she states.

Despite potential discrepancies in cleanliness, the sheer number of users can heighten the likelihood of contracting germs. Dr Ackerley offers numerous strategies for navigating public restrooms while minimising health risks. One critical piece of advice is to avoid placing bags on the floor, as this increases the chances of contact with harmful bacteria. If hooks are available, they should be used to keep belongings off the floor, along with keeping personal items, like phones, stored safely away.

Hand sanitiser is another essential tool. Carrying a sanitizer with alcohol content allows for quick disinfection, particularly after touching door handles. Dr Ackerley encourages the use of soap for handwashing, even when dispensers appear less than pristine. "It’s the rubbing, washing, and rinsing that gets bacteria off your hands, not the soap itself," she notes. Proper technique and duration are crucial; the entire handwashing process should last a minimum of 20 seconds to ensure effective germ removal.

Opting for the farthest cubicle in a restroom can provide a surprising advantage, as this area tends to be less frequented and, consequently, cleaner. Research from psychologists at the University of California San Diego suggests that humans tend to gravitate towards middle options, making the choice of the end cubicle a smart move to reduce exposure.

Moreover, Dr Ackerley tackles common misconceptions about using toilet seats. Contrary to popular belief, sitting on a clean toilet seat is generally safe unless there are open wounds. "Intact skin is a good protector," she asserts, cautioning that squatting could lead to incomplete bladder emptying, which, in turn, may invite urinary tract infections.

To reduce the risk of aerosol spray—colloquially known as "toilet plume"—closing the lid before flushing is advised. Research from the University of Colorado showed that flushing could propel particles of faecal matter as high as 1.5 metres within eight seconds, making this simple action a worthy practice to adopt.

It is universally acknowledged that avoiding direct contact with the face—particularly the eyes—is crucial in preventing the spread of infections. Dr Ackerley emphasises the importance of keeping hands clean, notably highlighting that touching the face can be a significant route for transmission of infections like Covid-19.

When it comes to drying hands, if paper towels or hand dryers are unavailable, Dr Ackerley recommends shaking off excess water and rubbing hands together to facilitate drying. While it is less than ideal to wipe hands on clothing, doing so on the front rather than the back is preferable for hygiene reasons.

Finally, non-essential contact with surfaces should be kept at a minimum. Using a paper towel to turn off taps is advisable, and if there are no means available to avoid touching door handles, employing the elbow is a practical solution.

Armed with these guidelines from Dr Ackerley, traversing public restrooms need not be an overwhelming ordeal. By adopting mindful practices, individuals can significantly mitigate health risks while navigating these often-dreaded facilities.

### Reference Map

1. [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14738711/avoid-bug-public-loo-cubicle-hygiene-expert-flushing.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
2. [[2]](https://time.com/5514669/bacteria-germs-bathroom/)
3. [[3]](https://saraya.world/news/consumer-news/8-hygiene-tips-to-use-public-washrooms-safely)
4. [[4]](https://time.com/5182826/how-to-use-a-toilet-seat-cover/)
5. [[5]](https://onepointpartitions.com/blog/2020/05/19/how-to-avoid-germs-in-public-restrooms/)
6. [[6]](https://www.healthline.com/health/clean-guide-to-public-restrooms)
7. [[7]](https://www.servicemasterclean.com/servicemaster-services-mobile/tips-and-resources/local-blog/2017/july/avoiding-germs-in-public-places/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14738711/avoid-bug-public-loo-cubicle-hygiene-expert-flushing.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://time.com/5514669/bacteria-germs-bathroom/> - An article from Time magazine discusses the prevalence of bacteria in bathrooms, highlighting that the toothbrush holder, not the toilet, is often the germiest spot. It emphasizes the importance of proper handwashing and notes that while bathrooms contain various bacteria, most are harmless to healthy individuals. The piece also mentions that automatic hand dryers can disperse bacteria, suggesting that paper towels may be more sanitary. Overall, the article advises regular handwashing to prevent the spread of germs in bathrooms.
3. <https://saraya.world/news/consumer-news/8-hygiene-tips-to-use-public-washrooms-safely> - This article provides eight hygiene tips for safely using public washrooms. Recommendations include not placing bags on the floor to avoid contact with germs, carrying hand sanitizer to clean hands after touching door handles, using soap in public toilets regardless of dispenser cleanliness, and opting for the farthest cubicle, which is likely to be the cleanest. It also advises against squatting over toilet seats, closing the lid before flushing to reduce aerosol spray, avoiding touching the face, drying hands thoroughly, and minimizing contact with surfaces.
4. <https://time.com/5182826/how-to-use-a-toilet-seat-cover/> - Time magazine addresses the effectiveness of toilet seat covers in preventing illness. The article explains that while they may provide comfort, they do not effectively block microscopic organisms. It notes that public toilet seats are not typically covered with harmful germs, and that fecal bacteria on toilet seats are usually harmless unless they enter the body through open wounds or are transferred via hands. The piece emphasizes the importance of good hand hygiene and suggests that using additional toilet paper or seat covers has environmental costs.
5. <https://onepointpartitions.com/blog/2020/05/19/how-to-avoid-germs-in-public-restrooms/> - This blog post offers strategies to avoid germs in public restrooms. It advises minimizing direct contact with surfaces by using automatic dispensers and turning off faucets with paper towels. The article also recommends avoiding touching the face, not placing items on the floor to prevent germ transfer, and washing and drying hands thoroughly. It highlights that bacteria can survive on surfaces for several hours, making proper hand hygiene crucial in preventing the spread of infections.
6. <https://www.healthline.com/health/clean-guide-to-public-restrooms> - Healthline provides a comprehensive guide to using public restrooms safely. The article suggests steps such as dealing with odors by covering the nose, entering a stall or urinal without touching surfaces, inspecting the seat before sitting, and flushing smartly by using toilet paper or a foot to avoid direct contact. It emphasizes the importance of washing hands thoroughly and drying them completely, noting that damp hands can spread more germs than dry ones. The piece also advises avoiding touching the face and using a paper towel to open the door when exiting.
7. <https://www.servicemasterclean.com/servicemaster-services-mobile/tips-and-resources/local-blog/2017/july/avoiding-germs-in-public-places/> - This article discusses the presence of germs in public bathrooms and offers tips to reduce exposure. It mentions that even when regularly cleaned, public bathrooms harbor plenty of germs on surfaces like toilet seats, handles, faucets, and doors. Recommendations include using a paper towel to touch handles, avoiding setting items on the bathroom floor, and not lingering after flushing to prevent exposure to aerosolized bacteria. The piece also suggests using a paper towel to open the door when exiting to minimize contact with potentially contaminated surfaces.