

Infectious Diseases: How to Decrease Your Risk of Getting One

One of the best ways to decrease your risk of getting an infectious disease is by understanding how germs spread and how you can minimize your risk of infection. Infectious diseases are spread through both direct and indirect contact.

Direct contact

Person to person:

Bacteria, viruses or other germs can pass from one person to another through physical contact, coughing or kissing. These germs can also spread through the exchange of body fluids from sexual contact or through a blood transfusion.

Animal to person:

A household pet might seem harmless, but pets can carry many germs. Being bitten or scratched by an infected animal can make you sick and, in extreme circumstances, could even cause death. Handling animal waste can be hazardous, too. For example, you can acquire a toxoplasmosis infection by scooping your cat's litter box, particularly if you're pregnant.

Mother to unborn child:

A pregnant woman may pass germs that cause infectious diseases to her unborn baby. Germs can pass through the placenta, as is the case of the AIDS virus and the toxoplasmosis parasite. Or germs can spread during labor and delivery, as is the case for a mother infected with group B streptococcus.

Indirect contact

Disease-causing organisms are found on inanimate objects, such as tabletops, doorknobs or faucet handles. When you touch a doorknob after someone with the flu or a cold has touched it, you can pick up the germs he or she left behind. If you then touch your eyes, mouth or nose before washing your hands, you may become infected. There are some organisms that naturally live in the environment that carry infectious disease; these include fungal infections like histoplasmosis or blastomycosis, as well as bacterial infections such as anthrax.

Airborne dispersal

Droplet transmission:

When you cough or sneeze, you expel droplets into the air around you. If you're sick with the flu or other illness the droplets you expel contain the germ that caused your illness. Droplets travel only about three feet because they're usually too large to stay suspended in the air for a long time. However, if a droplet from an infected person comes in contact with your eyes, nose or mouth, you may soon experience symptoms of the illness. Crowded, indoor environments may promote the chances of droplet transmission --which explains the increase in respiratory infections during the winter months.

Particle transmission:

Some disease-causing germs travel through the air in particles considerably smaller than droplets. These tiny particles remain suspended in the air for extended periods of time and can travel in air currents. If you breathe in an airborne virus, bacterium or other germ, you may become infected and show signs and symptoms of the disease. Colds caused by viruses, influenza and tuberculosis are examples of infectious diseases that spread through the air in both particle and droplet form.

Infectious diseases spread through insect bites and vehicles

Insect bites and stings:

Some germs use insect carriers — such as mosquitoes, fleas, lice or ticks -- to move from host to host. Mosquitoes can carry the malaria parasite or West Nile virus, and deer ticks may carry the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. The insect carries the germ on its body or in its intestinal tract. After the insect lands on you or bites you, the germs move into your body and can make you sick. Sometimes the germs that cause infectious disease need the insect for specific biological reasons. They use the insect's body to multiply, which is necessary before the germs can infect a new host.

Food contamination:

Another way disease-causing germs can infect you is through contaminated food and water. Contamination with *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) is common. *E. coli* is a bacterium present in or on certain foods, such as undercooked hamburger or unwashed fruits or vegetables. When you eat foods contaminated with *E. coli*, chances are you'll experience an illness — sometimes referred to as food poisoning.

How to prevent the spread of infectious diseases

Wash your hands often

This is especially important before and after preparing food, before eating and after using the toilet.

Get vaccinated

Immunization can drastically reduce your chances of contracting many diseases. Make sure to keep your recommended vaccinations, as well as your children's, up-to-date.

Use antibiotics sensibly

Only take antibiotics when necessary, and take them exactly as directed if they are prescribed. Don't stop taking them early because your symptoms have gone away.

Stay at home if you have signs and symptoms of an infection

Don't go to work if you are vomiting, have diarrhea or are running a fever. Don't send your child to school if he or she has these signs and symptoms, either.

Be smart about food preparation

Keep counters and other kitchen surfaces clean when preparing meals. In addition, promptly refrigerate leftovers—don't let cooked foods remain at room temperature for extended periods of time.

Pay special attention to cleaning the 'hot zones' in your home

These include the kitchen and bathroom — two rooms that can have high concentrations of bacteria and other infectious agents.

Practice safe sex

Use condoms if you or your partner has a history of sexually transmitted diseases or high-risk behavior — or abstain altogether.

Don't share personal items

Use your own toothbrush, comb and razor blade. Avoid sharing drinking glasses or dining utensils.

Travel wisely

Don't fly when you're ill. With so many people confined to a small area, you may infect other passengers on the plane. And your trip won't be comfortable, either. Depending on where your travels take you, talk to your doctor about any special immunizations you may need.

Keep your pets healthy

Bring your pet to a veterinarian for regular care and vaccinations. Keep your pet's living area clean.