



You wouldn't believe how many invisible horrors can lurk on what looks like a perfectly clean desk. Vivien Wilson investigates how you can do battle against them.

germ warfare

few people who work in an office give much thought to cleaning it, even though we wouldn't dream of neglecting our homes in the same way. Many office cleaners just vacuum the floors and empty the bins, but what about cleaning the less obvious areas? Germs can build up in the most heavily used places, such as phone mouthpieces, computer keyboards, mice and desk surfaces. But there are many reasons why office hygiene should be taken seriously. Germs and viruses lying around in an office environment can make workers ill, which usually translates to absence from work and therefore fewer man-hours and lower productivity. In fact, the bare minimum cost to employers of worker absence (not including the cost to the economy in lost productivity) is over £500m in wages and benefits paid for work not done. In the UK 192 million working days were lost last year, costing the economy £11.2bn in revenue. So it makes sense to give some more thought to ensuring your office is as clean and germ free as possible. But what sort of areas are the danger hotspots?

The 2002 study 'Germs in the Workplace' revealed the full horror of the little nasties lurking in your office. A total of 616 surfaces in offices and cubicles were tested and analysed at the University of Arizona, USA.

Researchers found that the most germ-contaminated spot in your office is the phone, with up to

25,127 microbes per square inch, closely followed by the desktop. In fact, the area where you rest your hand on the desk commonly has around 10 million bacteria, over 400 times more than the average toilet seat. Despite desks being at the centre of most people's activities, they are rarely cleaned properly. The office water fountain was also a hotspot, along with the microwave door handle. And your computer keyboard and mouse support 3,295 and 1,676 microbes per square inch respectively.

Bacteria are not the only thing to worry about. You're constantly shedding dead skin cells, which settle in all the nooks and crannies on your desk. Dust mites thrive on these skin particles and can live happily under your computer keys. The mites cause allergies like asthma and hayfever symptoms.

The cleanest places tended to be common areas that are cleaned and disinfected every day, such as conference rooms. Perhaps surprisingly, the least contaminated site in all office buildings tends to be the light switch.

The study found that bacteria levels increased drastically during the day, peaking after lunch. That's not really surprising when you consider that around 57% of workers snack at their desks at least once a day, with more than three quarters "only occasionally" cleaning their desks before eating, and 20% never bothering at all.





And people carrying viruses leave an infectious trail on every surface they touch, with the plucky things surviving for up to three days on each one, potentially exposing the entire office.

Microbiologist Dr Charles Gerba, of the University of Arizona, who carried out the research, said: "An office can become an incubator. Without cleaning, a small area on your desk or phone can sustain millions of bacteria that could potentially cause illness."

British microbiologist Professor Sally Bloomfield said the study reinforced the need for good hygiene practices at work. "The superhighways for bacteria are hands and the surfaces we touch. Viruses are transferred by our hands, especially cold viruses."

The type of job you do could also play a part in your risk of infection. Perhaps unsurprisingly, teachers came into contact with the most germs during the course of their jobs, an average of 17,800 bacteria per square inch of surface. But they are followed by accountants and bankers, with doctors coming in at number five and consultants at number seven. Lawyers were the least germiest profession tested, with only an average of 900 bacteria per square inch.

Women also have desks three or four times dirtier than men, possibly because they spend more time in contact with children and tend to keep food on their desks or in drawers (the survey found that 75% were guilty of this).

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FACTBOX

Bacteria levels on keyboards fall by **70%** if they are cleaned every 12 hours

Source: University College London Hospital

Keyboards contaminated with MRSA spread to hands **92%** of the time

Source: Chicago Northwestern Memorial Hospital

A **mobile phone** contains more bacteria than the bottom of our shoes

Source: Dial-a-Phone

Professor Bloomfield added: "If you leave food on your desktop that you would usually put in the fridge at home, then you are asking for trouble."

However, the study did find that simply cleaning a desk with disinfecting wipes can reduce bacteria levels by around 99%. It so what sort of regular cleaning routine should you have if you want your desk to be germ free?

Karen Harrison, marketing manager for office products manufacturer AF International, says: "We recommend that people clean their phone or headset every day with antibacterial wipes, especially if they are hot-desking. Keyboards should be cleaned about every other day. We recommend a non-flammable air duster (an air spray), which can lift dirt out from underneath the keys. Desks should again be cleaned every other day with either a spray or foam type product. Computer screens should be kept clean to reduce the risk of eye problems rather than to get rid of germs. Make sure you use a product that is suitable for the type of screen that you have."

It's as simple as that. Say goodbye to bacteria and hello to a healthy future! ●