

DO ME A FAVOR; KEEP YOUR HANDS TO YOURSELF

I'm afraid I'm turning into Howard Hughes.

Not because I'm becoming rich (or dead), but because I think I'm developing a germ phobia.

Actually, it's not a phobia yet – I just have an increasing aversion to germs. I consider it a phobia only when someone else has an increasing aversion to germs.

Germs have two attributes that make them perfect for fanning my irrational fears; they are known to grow on pretty much everything, and they are invisible.

There is no peace of mind for those of us with active imaginations – we see germs everywhere. They infest grocery cart handles, the ballpoint pens at every checkout station, door handles and every magazine in your doctor's waiting room and at the health club.

Those last two are particularly disturbing. You'd think doctors' offices and health clubs would be interested in promoting health instead of breeding microbes.

I attend a Rotary (service club) meeting every Tuesday morning, and if I was a germ, that's where I would go. There's always a greeter at our meetings – someone to shake your hand as you enter. If you're the last one in, you get every germ from every member that preceded you, and probably their kids' germs as well.

If you somehow survive the handshake, every utensil at the breakfast buffet is handled by every member, and the table you sit at probably hasn't been disinfected since the Carter administration.

Shaking hands is a dumb practice anyway. Although the Romans utilized handshakes about 2,500 years ago, they weren't common in the United

States until Thomas Jefferson brought them to American practice while he was in the White House.

He felt that a handshake was more democratic than the formal bows that were popular on the continent. I would blame him for recklessly causing my handshake paranoia, except the germ theory of disease wasn't established until the 1870's.

Actually, it turns out that handshakes aren't the biggest culprit. Studies by the Mayo Clinic indicate that the activities that transfer the most bacteria from hand to mouth are cleaning your house and preparing a meal.

Cleaning the house has never has been high on my list anyway. I have always felt that it is best not to disturb piles of dirt and dust because the germs may become agitated and attack like Africanized bees.

As for meal preparation, I guarantee there is no "five-second rule" in our house. If an unopened can of corn hits the floor, it's done for. I'll grab it with my barbecue tongs and set it aside for the homeless – I figure they have better developed antibodies.

Next highest on the Mayo's bacteria transfer list was petting a dog or cat, followed by children returning from elementary school, doing your laundry and (finally) using a public restroom.

The word "public" is your clue that you don't want to go there. Everyone else does, and they are teeming with germs. I have seen people who I suspect could lose 10% of their body weight with a good washing.

There is a name for having a morbid fear of germs, contamination or dirt, and that's mysophobia. This phobia can make the sufferer avoid germ contact to the point of becoming a recluse, which will actually be an advantage if the avian flu pandemic ever gets going.

If that happens, I expect to be getting calls from the UI Hygienic Lab asking advice on how to instill my germ aversion (which would instantly become a valuable asset) into the general public.

According to statistics issued in 2003 by a global health care organization (BUPA), phobias tend to affect more women than men (13% of women are affected compared to 4% of men). This may explain why women can consistently see crud invisible to the average male eye.

I could write more on the topic of mysophobia, but it's getting increasingly difficult for me to type when my computer keyboard is covered with Kleenexes.