



Your Cell Phone is Making You Sick

By Infection Control Today

One in six cell phones in the United Kingdom is contaminated with fecal matter, according to new research released ahead of this year's Global Handwashing Day (October 15, 2011). Experts say the most likely reason for the potentially harmful bacteria festering on so many gadgets is people failing to wash their hands properly with soap after going to the restroom.

The findings of the UK-wide study by scientists from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and Queen Mary, University of London, also reveal a tendency among people to lie about their hygiene habits. Although 95 percent of people said they washed their hands with soap where possible, 92 percent of phones and 82 percent of hands had bacteria on them. Alarmingly, 16 percent of hands and 16 percent of phones were found to harbor *E. coli*—bacteria of a fecal origin. Harmful *E. coli* bacteria are associated with stomach illness and have been implicated in serious cases of food poisoning such as the fatal O157 outbreak in Germany in June of this year.

Hygiene expert and UK campaign leader for Global Handwashing Day, Dr. Val Curtis from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, says, "This study provides more evidence that some people still don't wash their hands properly, especially after going to the restroom. I hope the thought of having *E. coli* on their hands and phones encourage them to take more care in the bathroom—washing your hands with soap is such a simple thing to do but there is no doubt it saves lives."

Peter Barratt, technical manager at Initial Washroom Solutions, which supports Global Handwashing Day, notes "Today's research is shocking and demonstrates the importance of effective hygiene. It is critical that people take hand hygiene seriously and that businesses offer their employees and customers a practical way of protecting themselves to help combat the spread of illness."

Researchers travelled to 12 cities in the UK and took 390 samples from cell phones and hands, which were analyzed in the lab to find out the type and number of germs lurking there. They also asked participants a series of questions about their handwashing habits.

The largest proportion of contaminated phones was in Birmingham (41 percent) while Londoners were caught with the highest proportion of *E. coli* present on hands (28 percent). However, actual levels of bacteria increased the further north the scientists went, the dirtiest city being Glasgow, where average bacterial levels on phones and hands were found to be nine times higher than in Brighton, reinforcing a North/South divide. The scientists also found those who had bacteria on their hands were three times as likely to have bacteria on their phone.

Dr. Ron Cutler of Queen Mary, University of London, says, "Our analysis revealed some interesting results from around the UK. While some cities did much better than others, the fact that *E. coli* is present on phones and hands in every location shows this is a nationwide problem. People may claim they wash their hands regularly but the science shows otherwise."

Fecal bacteria can survive on hands and surfaces for hours at a time, especially in warmer temperatures away from sunlight. They are easily transferred by touch to door handles, food, and even mobile phones. From there, the germs can be picked up by other people. Every year, 3.5 million children under the age of five are killed by pneumonia and diarrheal diseases, and the simple action of washing hands with soap is one of the most effective ways of preventing these illnesses. In developed countries, hand washing with soap helps to prevent the spread of viral infections, such as norovirus, rotavirus and influenza.

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