

Health Brief

How Germy Is Your Car?

Allison Van Dusen, 04.05.07, 12:01 AM ET

If you're like most people you spend at least a few hours a day in the car--whether it's commuting to and from work, running to the grocery store or picking up the kids from a soccer game.

But though you might think twice before touching the seat on a public bus or holding the rail on the subway, you probably don't think too much about your car's cleanliness. Sure, there are coffee stains from a few weeks ago on your [cup holder](#) and an inch of dust coating your [dashboard](#).

But it isn't hurting anybody, is it?

In Pictures: Your Car's Germy Hot Spots

Research shows otherwise. Charles Gerba, a professor at the University of Arizona who has been researching germ hot spots for years, showed in a 2006 study that our cars are littered with bacteria--and in a few places you might not expect.

The dashboard, for instance, turned out to have the second-largest amount of microorganisms present. While often untouched, its vents may draw bacteria via the air circulation system. The fact that it's usually the warmest spot in a car, since the sun shines directly on it, also promotes germ growth, says Gerba, who worked on the study with University of Arizona research specialist Sheri Maxwell.

A spot where you've [spilled food](#), such as fries or donut crumbs, may look harmless. But spills produced the most bacteria among the car sites tested.

[Experts weigh in on how to deal with a runny nose, dry eyes and uncontrollable sneezing.](#)

The researchers sampled 11 different sites inside 100 cars in Illinois, Arizona, Florida, California and Washington, D.C., and looked for both mold and bacteria. The study also examined variables such as vehicle type, whether children traveled in the car, geographic location and the gender and marital status of the drivers.

Single people and men proved to have the cleanest cars and those in Arizona had the lowest bacteria numbers, while married people and women had the germiest vehicles.

That's because women tend to drive the family car, which holds the [car seats](#) and harbors children's germs, the study found. More bacteria were isolated in vans and SUVs, typical family vehicles, than in cars.

Location, Location

But beyond whether you have children, the city you call home can make it easier or harder to keep your car clean.

Of the cities tested, Tampa, Fla., ranked highest in average amounts of bacteria. Thanks to its humid, high temperatures, the city's drivers had 10 times more bacteria in their cars than Tucson, Ariz., residents. Higher average monthly rainfall in cities also translated to more bacteria, according to the study, possibly because bacteria can survive longer in moist environments.

Cars in Chicago, on the other hand, had 15 times more mold occurrences than those in Tampa due to the differences in temperature.

Quick Fixes

If your car is suddenly starting to sound like it needs a cleaning, Gerba recommends disinfecting it once a week. Start with any food stains and work your way down to the [change holder](#) and [steering wheel](#), the place our hands come into contact with the most.

"Don't become overly paranoid," Gerba says. "Just clean the seat before the kids start sticking to the bottom."

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