

AT WORK

Germs lie in wait at work

By Andrea Kay

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Not to give you one more thing to worry about at work, but here's one more thing to worry about: All the germs you can pick up at work could lead to that nasty flu going around.

The germs could be living on the change the cashier in the cafeteria handed you. Germs are waiting to pounce from the bathroom doorknob at your office onto your hands.

* And your desk! This is one of the most fertile germ breeding grounds — second to your phone — as the most contaminated area in the workplace, according to a 2001 study by University of Arizona microbiologist Charles Gerba.

The study, funded by The Clorox Co., found there are 20,961 germs per square inch on the desk, 25,127 on the phone, 3,295 on the computer keyboard and 1,676 on the mouse.

Most workers say getting sick from germs at work is a big worry as they enter the new year. According to another survey — this one by Opinion Research Corporation for Kimberly-Clark Professional — 66 percent of people cited the flu as the health issue they were most concerned about for 2004.

What bugs people most are co-workers who spread germs because they don't wash their hands after using the bathroom.

With more than a quarter of those surveyed saying they go to work when sick, here's what well colleagues want them to do if they can't stay home from work: First, wash their hands as often as possible. Second, stay away from them. And a small percentage wants infected workers relegated to a special sick room.

But who's really responsible for keeping your workplace healthy? Forty percent of those surveyed said it's up to the cleaning staff. Only 27 percent said they felt they should be most responsible.

The most reasonable solution seems to be to take the matter into your hands with precautions and doing what you expect others to do:

■ Since odds are good the cleaning crew doesn't touch your desk, use a disinfectant on your desk, keyboard and phone and clean up your crumbs every day.

■ Always, always wash your hands after using the restroom and before eating.

■ Don't come to work when you're sick.

■ Cover your mouth when you sneeze.

■ Don't touch common surfaces like phones and copiers after you've blown your nose.

Here's to a healthy year.

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