

Think twice before eating lunch at germ-filled desk

By Harry Wessel

THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

ORLANDO, Fla. — Jon Kane's workday usually stretches from 9 in the morning to 8 at night. To keep it from being even longer, the Orlando attorney eats lunch at his desk.

On a recent workday, Kane's midday meal consisted of a package of StarKist tuna and crackers, washed down with a Coke.

"I clear off a portion of my desk next to the computer and eat while working," says Kane, 40, with the law firm of Mateer & Harbert. "I used to not eat lunch at all. This is an improvement."

Kane has plenty of company in the working world. A February 2004 survey of more than 1,500 workers nationwide found that 42 percent of workers regularly eat lunch at their desks. That's up from 38 percent in 2002, according to CareerBuilder.com, the Internet recruiting firm that conducted the surveys.

Eating at your desk may be time-efficient, but, from a health-and-hygiene standpoint, you're better off lunching in the company restroom.

Really.

Three summers ago, University of Arizona microbiologist Charles Gerba conducted a "workplace germ study" in four U.S. cities: Tucson, Ariz., San Francisco, New York and Tampa.

Gerba and his team of researchers took bacteria samples from 12 different workplace surfaces — from desktops, phones and keyboards to water-fountain handles, elevator buttons and toilet seats.

On average, toilet seats had bacteria levels of 49 per square inch — the lowest of the 12 surfaces tested. On average, desktops had bacteria levels that were 428 times higher: 20,961 per square inch.

And desktops were only No. 2 among the germ-coated workplace surfaces tested. The winner: Desk telephones, which had 25,127 bacteria per square inch.

The workplace germ study was funded by Clorox, which makes disinfecting wipes designed to kill all those nasty bacteria. Nevertheless, Gerba's findings were unambiguous: "The average desktop has more bacteria than any surface tested in the bathroom," his study concluded.

There is a logical explanation to this off-putting finding. Most workplace bathrooms, including those checked in Gerba's study, undergo regular janitorial cleaning with strong disinfectants. Work desks, particularly cluttered ones, can go weeks, months, even years between cleanings.

Bob Ashley, professor of food-service management at the University of Central Florida, explains that humans are able to tolerate "a reasonable amount of germs." But he rarely, if ever, eats at his desk. Just thinking about it makes him uncomfortable.

"There's an accumulation over time of people coughing, sneezing and talking over their desks," says Ashley, who teaches at the University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management.

In addition to frequent hand washing "for at least 20 seconds and rinsing under the hottest water you can stand," Ashley advises using an antibacterial spray to clean the desktop, keyboard, mouse and phone regularly — at least once a week.

Interesting article.
Supporting our claim
"desks can be dangerous"
w/ bactericidal surfaces!
What really scares
me is that I
ALWAYS eat at my
desk!

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