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Places Where Germs Are Everywhere

They're crawling on you right now. Here's how to avoid the buggers.

By Michael Martin / Published on December 22, 2019 | 9:01 PM

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Most of us think of ourselves as pretty clean people. And we generally are. It's the world around us that's dirty. A certain amount of exposure to that is good: Man has been coexisting with bacteria and viruses since ancient times, which strengthens the immune system. Until it has the opposite effect. Touching germy surfaces, then your nose, mouth or face, is the most common way to contract the most common illnesses—colds and flu. But you can protect yourself with a little awareness. These are some of the most common places where germs are everywhere.

1 Your Cell Phone

toilet paper and a smart phone to work from the toilet

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In the realm of everyday surfaces, cell phones are a bacterium's BFF. Why? We're constantly touching our phones, holding them to our mouths and setting them down on public surfaces, turning the average smartphone into a germ jitney. Skeptical? Researchers found that a dirty cell phone can contain more bacteria than a toilet seat.

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The Rx: Disinfect your cell phone monthly, and more frequently during cold and flu season. Mix a solution of 50% water and 50% isopropyl alcohol in a small spray bottle, apply it to a microfiber cloth, then wipe down the screen and buttons.

2 Door Handles

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We tend not to think about the germiness of public door handles, just because they're unavoidable. But their ubiquity is the best argument for frequent hand-washing: A recent test found the door handle on a New York City Starbucks location was 31 times germier than surfaces in the subway.

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The Rx: "Try to carry hand sanitizer with you, and always wash your hands before eating or touching your mouth," advises Danielle DonDiego, DO, of Your Doctors Online.

3 The Office Break Room

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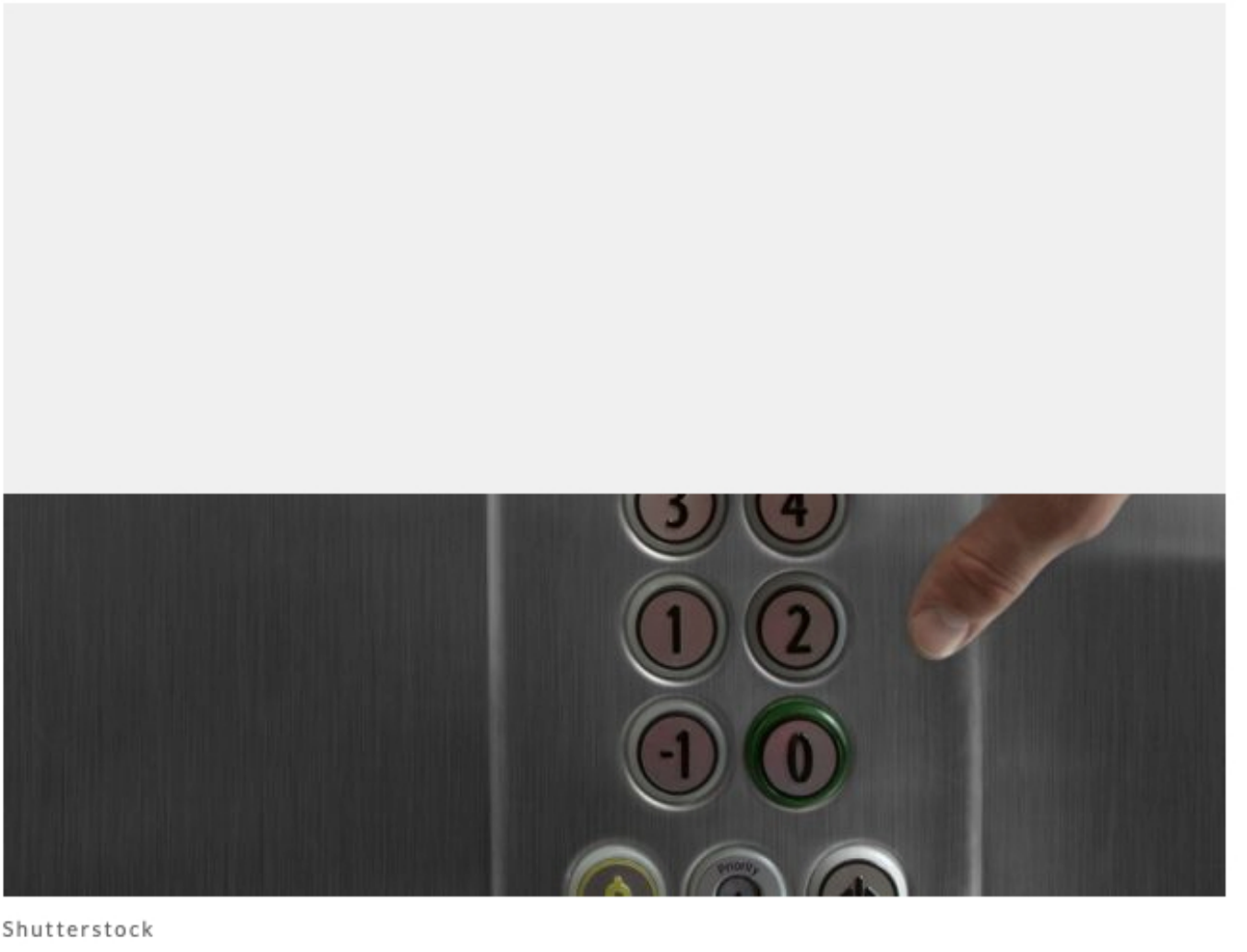
Think your workplace is toxic? It's also germy. And Ground Zero isn't the restroom. To study how germs spread in the workplace, researchers at the University of Arizona placed a synthetic germ on the coffee pot in the break room. Within four hours, it had spread to almost every surface in the office—much further than faux germs planted in the bathrooms.

The Rx: Wash your hands frequently at work. Keep hand sanitizer at your desk, and use it after you touch heavily trafficked surfaces.

4 Elevator Buttons



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Going down? With the flu, if you're not careful. One study at the University of Arizona found that elevator buttons contain 40 times the bacteria of a public toilet seat.

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The Rx: Press elevator buttons with the back of a knuckle to lower your risk of spreading germs from your fingertips to your face.

5 The Gym

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"As a dermatologist, I'm mindful of how patients contract fungal infections. One place where I see a lot of room for improvement is the gym," says Todd Minars, MD, of Minars Dermatology in Hollywood, Florida. "Many of us can't get through a long cardio session without music or podcasts, which we play via our phone. Unfortunately, the only places to store your phone on treadmills and stationary bikes are in water-bottle holders or small magazine shelves. After their workout, I see gym-goers handle their phones, and they never cleaned it. You've increased your chances for an infection." Exercise mats are also breeding grounds for bacteria; germs can linger on their porous plastic surface for hours to days.

The Rx: "Since most gyms have sanitizer wipes on-site, I highly recommend every gym attendee use them to fully wipe down your phone after you've finished your workout," says Minars. Bring your own exercise mat, or wipes, from home.

6 The Kitchen Sponge

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The germiest item in your house is in the kitchen, not your bathroom: It's the sponge. Researchers say that kitchen sponges contain more active bacteria—including illness-causing E. coli and salmonella—than any other surface in the house. How much more? A study by the Public Health and Safety Organization found coliform bacteria (a sign of fecal contamination) on more than 75% of kitchen dish sponges, compared to only 9% of bathroom handles.

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The Rx: Replace your sponges often, or sanitize them once a week in the microwave. Saturate them with water and microwave on high for one minute (for scrub sponges) or two (for cellulose sponges).

7 Bathroom Sink

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"Studies found that sinks are the greatest reservoir of germ colonies in restrooms, thanks in part to accumulation of water that become breeding grounds for tiny organisms," says Adam Splaver, MD, a cardiologist in Hollywood, Florida. In fact, the Public Health and Safety Organization study found that the bathroom faucet handle is the sixth-germiest site in the average house. The toilet didn't even crack the top 10.

The Rx: Wash your hands every time you use the bathroom, and thoroughly clean your bathroom sink once a week.

8 Your Workstation

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"One of the germiest areas that doesn't get enough attention is your computer," says Lynell Ross, a certified health and wellness coach and founder of Zivadream. "Our workstations, particularly our keyboard and mouse, are germ traps. We get up from our workstation and touch germy items, like door handles and the office coffee maker, then continue working without making an effort to clean our hands. This allows germs to transfer from your hands to your workstation, where they multiply."

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The Rx: "Make an effort to routinely wipe down your keyboard, mouse and surrounding workstation area with disinfectant wipes," suggests Ross, "particularly during the winter months when we are most susceptible to sickness."

9 ATM Keypads

woman at the cash machine

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Because they're touched by potentially hundreds of people a day, ATM keypads were never going to win any hygiene awards. But (perhaps because we associate them with the joyous thing they dispense), we don't fully appreciate how germy they get. How germy is that? According to a new study by LendEDU, dirtier than the door handle on a public restroom.

The Rx: Press ATM keys with a knuckle to lower the chances you'll transfer germs to your mouth, and use hand sanitizer after you get your cash.

10 Public Makeup Testers

A 2005 study found between 67 and 100 percent of makeup-counter testers were contaminated with bacteria, including E. coli, staph and strep, bugs can cause serious skin and eye infections.

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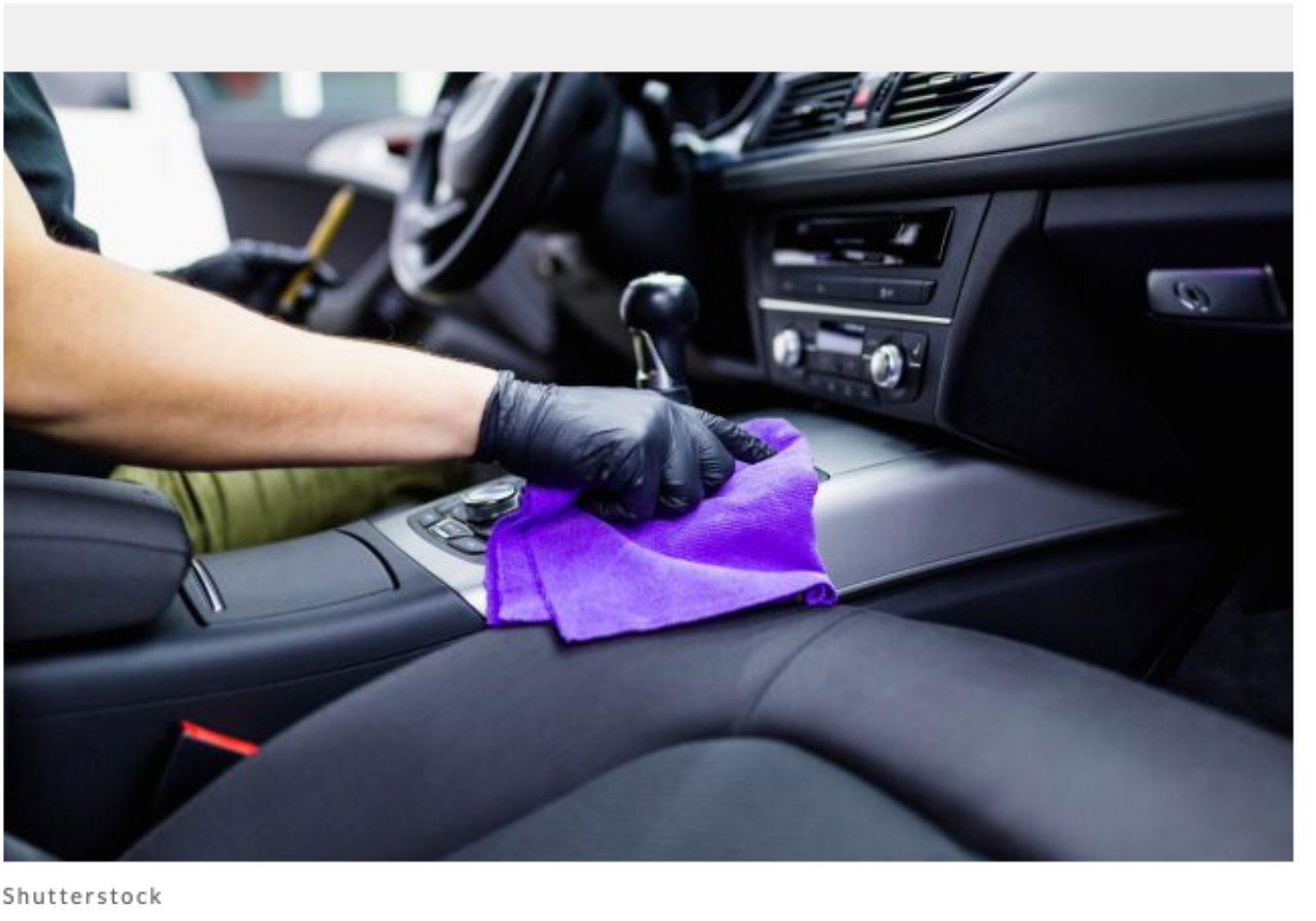
The Rx: Never use a public makeup tester on your face. Ask for a single-use sample that's sealed.

11 Your Car



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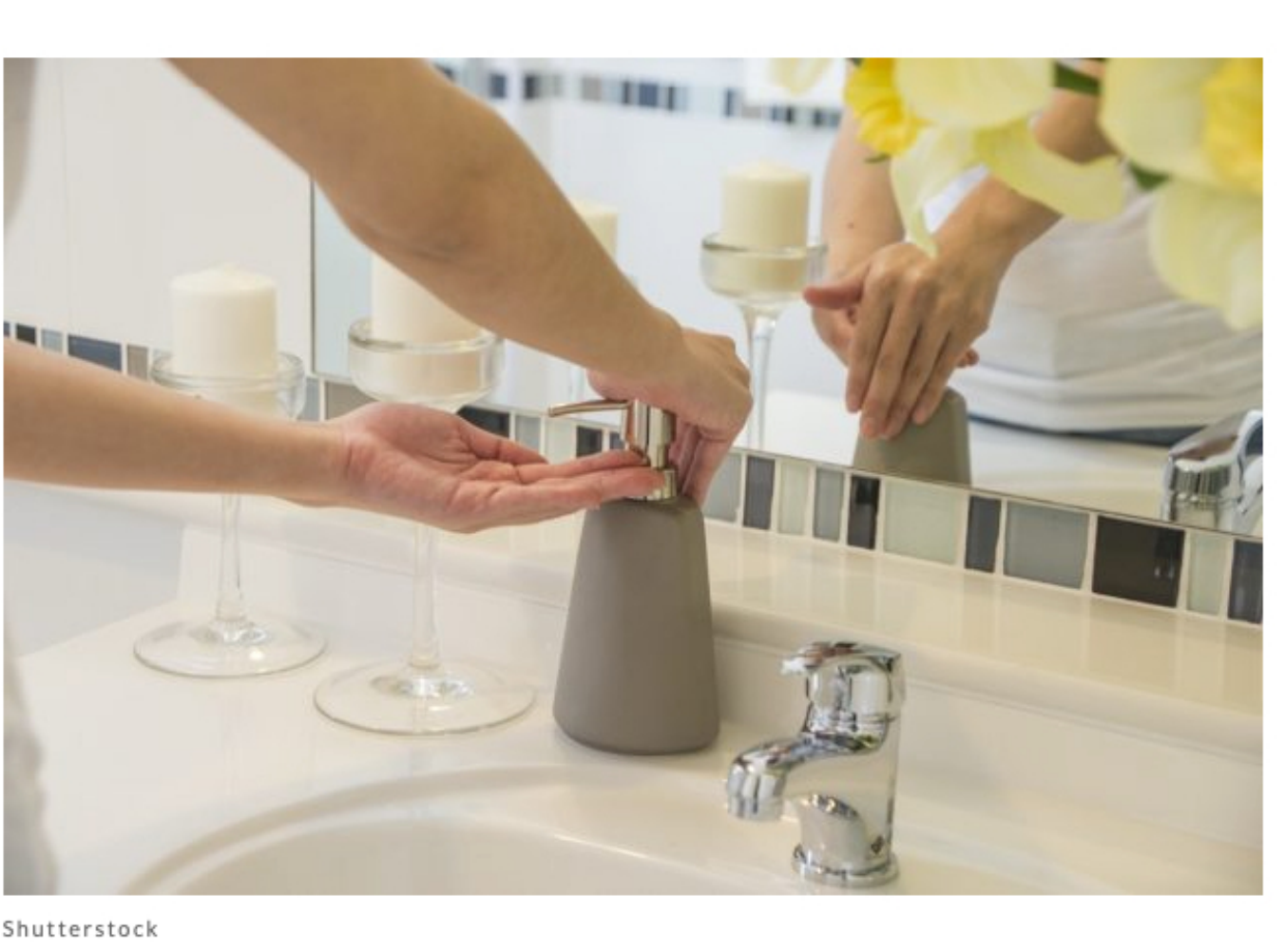
A recent study found there are 700 strains of bacteria, on average, living in the interior of your car. The average steering wheel has about 629 units of bacteria per square centimeter. That makes it four times dirtier than a public toilet seat!

The Rx: Clean your car once every few weeks. Use antibacterial cleaner on everything you touch, including the steering wheel, dash and controls.

12 Soap and Hand Sanitzer Pumps



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"Public soap dispensers are a surprising source of germs," says Ross. "Because they're often touched by people after only a quick hand rinse (or no rinse at all), they become covered with germs. The liquid inside has no ability to cleanse the pathogen-covered plastic handle of the container, so germs continue to accumulate and multiply." The same is true of the hand sanitizer pumps you see at the office or gym.

The Rx: "Make sure you wash your hands thoroughly with hot water and a healthy dose of soap after touching the dispenser," says Ross. "And make an effort to avoid jet dryers or touching the bathroom door on your way out if possible."

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13 The Grocery Store

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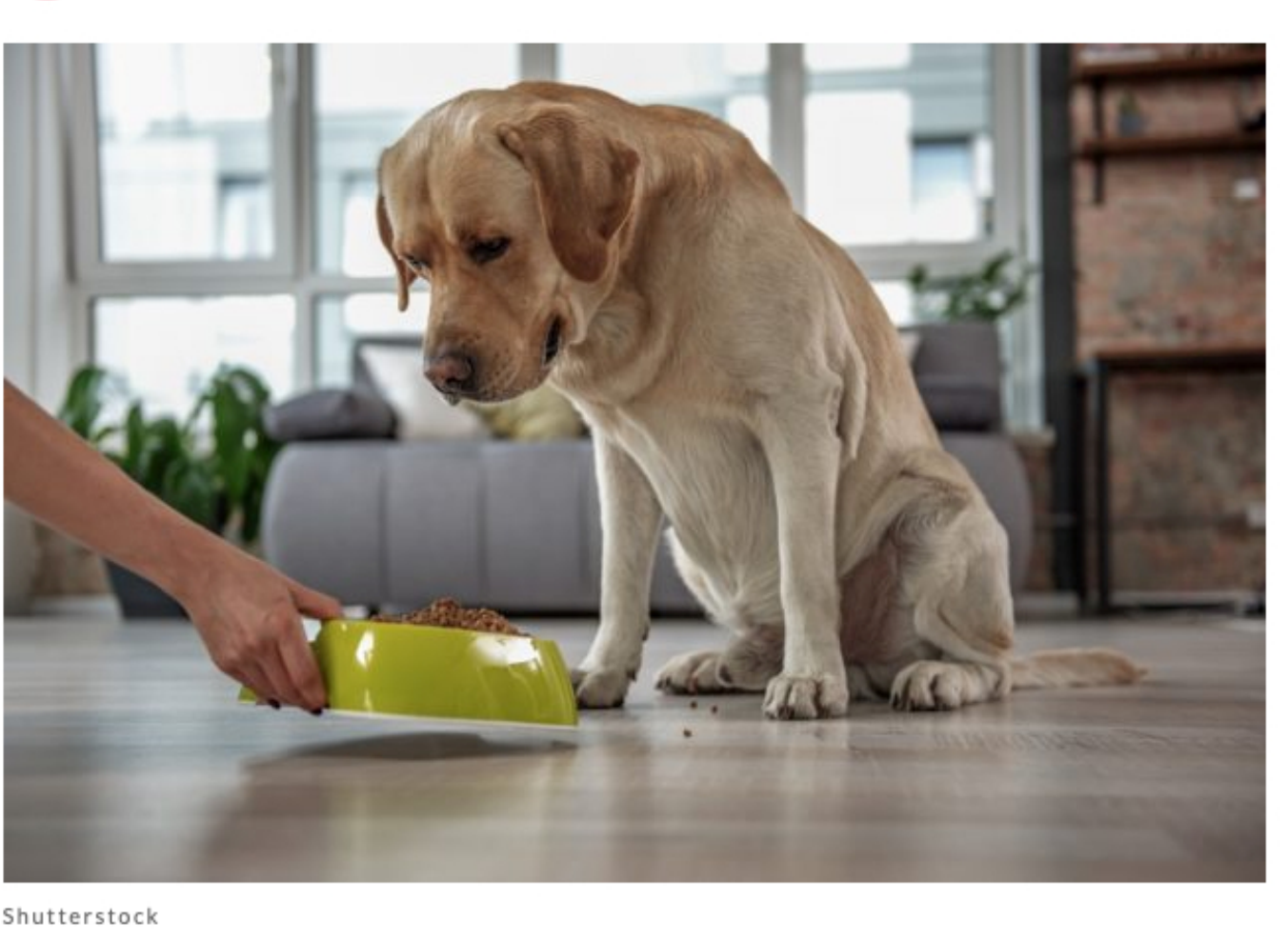
Your neighborhood grocery store is overstocked with germs from entrance to exit. One study found that more than 50 percent of grocery store shopping carts contain disease-causing bacteria, such as E. coli, that can cause gastrointestinal distress. A separate study found the handles on freezer cases have more germs than a toilet seat. And when Michigan State University researchers tested checkout conveyor belts for bacteria, 100 percent came back positive. They're made of a porous plastic that traps germs, yeast and mold.

The Rx: Use antibacterial wipes to disinfect cart handles, put all your produce in plastic bags to prevent it from being contaminated at the checkout, and when you get home, thoroughly wash anything you'll consume—and your hands.

14 Fido's Bowl



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"Ceramic and plastic dog bowls are amongst the most germ-ridden surfaces in the average home," says Richard Ross, editor of The Dog Clinic. "They often host E. Coli and salmonella, among a variety of other bacteria and viruses. Many dog owners don't realise this, and are happy to put the bowl on kitchen surfaces that are used to prepare food."

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The Rx: "Aside from keeping dog bowls away from food preparation and disinfecting them regularly, it's also a good idea to replace plastic bowls with those made from stainless steel," says Ross. "These aren't germ-proof but harbor less bacteria than alternatives."

15 This Area of Public Restrooms

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The news that public restrooms are germy may not bowl you over. But you may not have realized that trying to practice good hygiene there could in fact make you sick: "According to a 2018 study, hot-air hand dryers in public bathrooms may be sucking up bacteria from the air released when toilets flush and dumping the bacteria on your clean hands," says Splaver.

The Rx: Wash your hands, dry them with paper towels—not the air dryer—and for added insurance, "use paper towels to act as a barrier against bacterial transmission when turning on and off the faucet and opening the door," advises Splaver. And to live your happiest and healthiest life, don't miss these 100 Ways Your Home Could Be Making You Sick.

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