Infectious diseases A-Z: kitchen sponge shelf life

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Safe food handling and clean hands are important ways to avoid the spread of germs and bacteria this holiday season, and so is replacing your kitchen sponge.

"Make sure that the sponge you are using is itself not dirty and that the sponge is not cross-contaminating," says Mayo Clinic infectious diseases specialist Dr. Pritish Tosh. Cross-contamination can lead to food poisoning and occurs when bacteria spread from a food to a surface, from a surface to another food or from one food to another.

How dirty are kitchen sponges? A report published in National Center for Biotechnology Information found that in a study of 10 kitchens in the U.S., 33 percent and 67 percent of sponges tested positive for E. coli and fecal coliforms, respectively.

"Sponges tend to have much longer shelf life on kitchen sinks than they really ought to, and every once in awhile, throw your sponge into the dishwasher to get it super hot. If it smells funky, it's time to get rid of it," says Tosh.

It's also best to use a clean dish towel each morning.

When it comes to avoiding cross-contamination in the kitchen, Tosh says, "In general, the detergent effect of soap and water is sufficient for most of the things that we're doing and so it's just making sure you are

using enough soap and water."

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