

How to protect yourself at the gym, one of the germiest places around

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Free weights have 362 times more bacteria than a toilet seat, according to a study performed by EmLab P&K, a finding that could bring sweat to your brow before you even launch into your first bicep curl—especially with the new coronavirus in mind.

In the wake of COVID-19, [fitness centers](#) are sending emails to

members about prevention measures. Most include encouragement to stay home if you're feeling sick. There's also plenty of phrasing about amping up established disinfecting efforts.

"We've been instructing staff to wipe down basically anything that humans will touch—seats you sit on while waiting for class, extra wiping down of door knobs, mic sets for the instructors, etcetera," says Mariah Ostia, Flywheel Center City's studio manager.

Members are being asked to do their part, too.

"Avoid kissing, hugging, and the sharing of cups and [water bottles](#)," reads a Barry's Bootcamp email.

Add high-fiving to that list, says John Zurlo, Jefferson Health's division director of infectious disease. (His recommendation: celebratory elbow bumps instead.)

Wondering what else you can be doing to dodge germs at the gym? Zurlo shares some advice to practice on your next visit. Topping the list: keep your hands away from your face.

"If you touch a surface where someone has sneezed, like a gym bench, and then rub your eye with your pinky finger, the virus could spread," says Zurlo. "Our nose, mouth, and eyes have mucus membranes, and this is where respiratory infections like the coronavirus and the flu enter into the body."

Cue towels. Carry two with you—one to spread across each machine and one to wipe sweat from your face. Just remember to remain conscious of what surfaces the fabric touches, and which sections are still clean. If needed, toss your towel mid-workout in exchange for a new one.

Tissues work as barriers, too, and are especially useful in situations where a towel might feel clunky. Need to adjust sweaty glasses or scratch an itchy nose? Those are prime jobs for a Kleenex.

Likewise, grab a tissue or paper towel to avoid [hand](#) contact with water fountain handles. And when you go in for a drink, do so with care.

"It seems like common sense, but try not to touch your cheek to any part of the metal on the water fountain," says Zurlo. "You could also let the water run for a few seconds."

Since running to the bathroom sink in between every gym machine isn't realistic, Zurlo suggests using water breaks as reminders to get those hands clean.

"Probably more so than the soap, rinsing for the full 20 seconds is crucial," says Zurlo of hand-washing.

Twenty seconds: it's roughly the amount of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice. Or, as noted in a list by the Los Angeles Times, the chorus of Lizzo's Truth Hurts, Toto's Africa, or Prince's Raspberry Beret—all prime additions for your gym playlist.

Hand sanitizer is also handy, and with the coronavirus of concern, Zurlo says you needn't be too concerned about how often you're using it.

"In medicine, every time we walk into a [patient room](#), we use [hand sanitizer](#), and when we walk out of the room we use it again—so for physicians, sometimes that means 40, 50, 60 times a day," says Zurlo. "In my [personal life](#), I'm not using it all the time, but I don't know if I'd set any limit at the gym."

Use enough to cover every part of your hands, including rings. And as

with the hand sanitizer, utilize sanitizing wipes regularly, too.

"It's good gym etiquette to wipe down machines after you use them," notes Zurlo. "It's a big step to also be wiping down every machine before use, but at this point I can't see a downside to it."

Ultimately, how to navigate the gym comes down to awareness. To prevent injury, you have to pay attention to form. To prevent sickness, you have to pay attention to what you touch.

Being aware of those around you is important, too, says Zurlo. If someone's coughing, move.

But as long as you remain mindful, Zurlo says, there's no need to fear going to the gym, at least for now.

"Maybe I'd feel differently if we start to get hundreds or thousands of ([coronavirus](#)) cases in Philadelphia, but I'm certainly not avoiding my local fitness center," says Zurlo, who, at the time of the interview, was heading there soon. "I'm just being more cognizant of people around me and of my hands—washing them and 100% keeping them away from my face."

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