

Embed germ defence behaviours at home to reduce virus spread now and in the future

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Whilst the nation has taken to washing its hands regularly since the start of the pandemic, other individual behaviours, such as cleaning and

disinfecting surfaces or social distancing within the home, have proved harder to stick, say the researchers behind the behaviour change website '[Germ Defence](#)'.

In their new study, published today (Friday 26 February 2021) in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, psychologists from the universities of Bath, Bristol and Southampton, warn of the continuing risks of household transmission of COVID-19 and the ongoing importance of breaking chains of transmission now and in the future.

Their research analysed user data of the website Germ Defence—a site which was developed by clinicians and scientists to increase awareness of infection control at home. Germ Defence was adapted with funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) at the start of the pandemic to help in our response to COVID-19.

Germ Defence provides simple, tailored advice appropriate to people's different circumstances and helps people to use simple behaviour change techniques to reduce virus spread at home. This covers a variety of topics, such as the importance of opening windows to keep rooms well-ventilated, as well as reminders about cleaning surfaces and quarantining delivery packages. It has recently been updated with advice on keeping safe while attending vaccination appointments.

Previous research from the team has highlighted the effectiveness of Germ Defence techniques in working against respiratory infections., To date, the site has been accessed over half a million times, from users in over 150 countries.

Results from this work suggest Germ Defence has been effective in helping people improve their habits to reduce COVID-19 virus. However, findings also suggest that whilst most people have adhered to regular hand washing, other self-reported infection control behaviours

are much lower than is optimal for infection prevention.

From their study sample (a self-selecting group that the researchers acknowledge is likely to be more motivated to improve their behaviour), they found the majority of users washed their hands 'very often', yet were much less likely to self-isolate or wear a facemask at home if they had symptoms.

Such actions remain critical says the lead author Dr. Ben Ainsworth, from the University of Bath's Department of Psychology, and he hopes these findings can act as a reminder to us all that we need to embed these behaviours into our daily life to help reduce the spread. Longer-term, in a post-pandemic world, he emphasises that these behaviours will continue to remain important and could help to reduce the future spread of other infectious diseases, including seasonal flu.

He explains: "We know there are a number of simple precautions all of us can take which lower the chances of COVID-19 spreading within homes. Since the start of the pandemic and the increased focus on handwashing we know that some of these behaviours have stuck, yet others have proved much harder to catch on, not least ensuring that we socially-distance from other [family members](#) if we have symptoms or test positive.

"In spite of the current vaccine rollout and the recently-announced road map for unlocking, we have to continue to reduce infection spread and Germ Defence shows a powerful and simple way in which that can be done."

Professor Lucy Yardley from the University of Bristol adds: "Germ Defence was co-developed with members of the public to make it as accessible and helpful as possible. It has been translated into over 20 languages and is constantly updated by our expert team of clinicians,

scientists and members of the public to ensure it is up to date with the latest evidence. We also have new information that can help people keep safe when attending their vaccination appointment, which for some people might be the first time out of the house for some time."

The researchers highlight that it is vital to address barriers that some people might face in engaging with infection control behaviours, in particular financial ones, where houses are high occupancy, or where individuals have caring responsibilities which can make [infection](#) control measures harder.

More information: Ben Ainsworth et al, Infection Control Behavior at Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Observational Study of a Web-Based Behavioral Intervention (Germ Defence), *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.2196/22197](https://doi.org/10.2196/22197)

Provided by University of Bath

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