

You don't need to wipe down everything to protect yourself

September 17 2020, by Grace Dickinson, The Philadelphia Inquirer



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

If you were wiping down every single Amazon package, can of chickpeas, and takeout container at the start of the pandemic, you certainly weren't alone. Clorox, the world's biggest maker of disinfectant

cleaning materials, says it's still recovering from high demand of its popular disinfectant wipes, not expected to return to shelves until 2021.

In the beginning, we were all encouraged to take every precaution that we could. But do we still need to sanitize everything in sight?

With months of research now behind us, experts say the answer is probably not. Yet, that doesn't mean surfaces present zero risk. Here's how to approach things now.

Wash your hands, not your packages.

By now, we know that the virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. And experts agree that your time is better spent washing your hands after you return from the [grocery store](#) than wiping down every item brought home.

Why? "While it's theoretically possible that there's fomite-related transmission—transmission through contaminated surfaces—we're not seeing any cases reported that are directly linked to that," says Patricia Henwood, associate professor of emergency medicine at Thomas Jefferson University's Sidney Kimmel Medical College, and leader of the Emergency Medicine COVID-19 Task Force at Jefferson Health.

"Where people need to focus their energy on is hand-washing, masking and distancing," says Henwood.

When you're done putting your groceries away, wash your hands again. And then apply that same mindset as you move throughout your life. Pumping gas? Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer immediately after. It's more effective, and more important, than later wiping down your steering wheel. Experts say the likelihood of getting the coronavirus from a delivery box is low. But always remember to wash your hands

before eating. If your hands are contaminated and you touch your face, you could get sick.

"There are only so many surfaces you can remember to sanitize anyway," says Thersa Sweet, associate teaching professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Drexel University. "If you've touched something that has the virus on it, and you wash your hands, the virus is gone."

Risk of surface transmission is considered low. But that doesn't mean zero risk.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that while it's possible you can get the [coronavirus](#) by touching a surface that has the virus on it and then touching your face, "it's not thought to be the main way the virus spreads." But that doesn't mean the risk is zero.

"I don't want people to completely disregard the fact that the virus can be on surfaces," says Sweet. "Imagine someone coughs into their [hand](#), they touch a doorknob, and you come by two minutes later and touch the same doorknob, and then wipe your nose. You could become infected."

Hand-washing, and paying attention to what you touch, are still both important.

"Though the risk of surfaces causing transmission is low, you still want to be aware," says Dr. Eric Sachinwalla, medical director of Infection Prevention and Control at Einstein Medical Center Philadelphia.

"And there are other illnesses where it could be more of a concern, especially with flu season coming up."

What's worth wiping down

Experts say it's a good idea to regularly wipe down your cell phone. And if someone else borrows it, then you definitely should.

"It's like when you wear a cloth mask to the grocery store, and you wash it before using it again because there could be virus particles on the outside—your phone could be the same way, particularly because it's up against your face," says Sweet.

You may also want to disinfect your doorknobs, especially if you share an entrance with others outside of your household. And if you're returning to an office or sharing equipment, elevate your cleaning efforts.

But again, the [surface](#) you need to be most concerned about is the one on your hands.

if someone in your home gets sick, return to high alert.

Step up your cleaning game if someone in your household was, or may have been, exposed to COVID-19. This includes if they aren't experiencing symptoms but are awaiting test results.

In the event someone tests positive or gets sick, try to minimize their contact with shared surfaces. Keep them in one room, if possible, and avoid sharing a bathroom if you have a spare.

"Be more aggressive with cleaning, especially in areas where the [sick person](#) is living," says Sachinwalla. "Once they start feeling a little better, wash their sheets and towels regularly—you don't have to throw them away, just wash them. And then make sure you're wiping any horizontal surfaces where droplets could have spread."

Just like in a hospital, everything should be regularly wiped down in any high-risk setting.

You can stop wiping down your credit card. (But doing it wasn't wrong.)

Coronavirus advice is ever-evolving. While it may have felt a little ridiculous to sanitize your [credit card](#) after every public transaction, you don't have to feel silly for having done so. And health experts were never trying to trick you.

"This is a novel area of science, and of course at the beginning when we know less, we want to take as much precaution as possible," says Henwood. "We're trying to learn as much as we can, as fast as we can, and when we have more data, that's what leads us to change our guidance. That will continue to happen as we have more data and testing."

©2020 The Philadelphia Inquirer
Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: You don't need to wipe down everything to protect yourself (2020, September 17) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-dont.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
