

Think Before Eating at your Desk!

By Harry Wessel Copyright © 2004 The Seattle Times Company

Please read this article and then answer the questions at the end on a separate sheet of paper using complete, quality, and correct sentences.

The Orlando Sentinel ORLANDO, Fla. — Jon Kane's workday usually stretches from 9 in the morning to 8 at night. To keep it from being even longer, the Orlando attorney eats lunch at his desk. On a recent workday, Kane's midday meal consisted of a package of StarKist tuna and crackers, washed down with a Coke. "I clear off a portion of my desk next to the computer and eat while working," says Kane, 40, with the law firm of Mateer & Harbert. "I used to not eat lunch at all. This is an improvement."

Kane has plenty of company in the working world. A February 2004 survey of more than 1,500 workers nationwide found that 42 percent of workers regularly eat lunch at their desks. That's up from 38 percent in 2002, according to CareerBuilder.com, the Internet recruiting firm that conducted the surveys.

Eating at your desk may be time-efficient, but, from a health-and-hygiene standpoint, you're better off lunching in the company restroom. *Really*. (If you eat at your desk, you may want to skip the next few paragraphs. If you don't eat at your desk and want to win a bar bet, read on.)

Three summers ago, University of Arizona microbiologist Charles Gerba conducted a "workplace germ study" in four U.S. cities: Tucson, Ariz., San Francisco, New York and Tampa. Gerba and his team of researchers took bacteria samples from 12 different workplace surfaces — from desktops, phones and keyboards to water-fountain handles, elevator buttons and toilet seats.

On average, toilet seats had bacteria levels of 49 per square inch — the lowest of the 12 surfaces tested. On average, desktops had bacteria levels that were 428 times higher: 20,961 per square inch.

In case you're confused by all those numbers, here's the summary: A toilet seat is cleaner than your desk. And desktops were only No. 2 among the germ-coated workplace surfaces tested. The winner: Desk telephones, which had 25,127 bacteria per square inch. (Fortunately, it's tough to balance a club sandwich on a telephone.)

The workplace germ study was funded by Clorox, which makes disinfecting wipes designed to kill all those nasty bacteria. Nevertheless, Gerba's findings were unambiguous: "The average desktop has more bacteria than any surface tested in the bathroom," his study concluded. There is a logical explanation to this off-putting finding. Most workplace bathrooms, including those checked in Gerba's study, undergo regular janitorial cleaning with strong disinfectants. Work desks, particularly cluttered ones, can go weeks, months, even years between cleanings. "We have a cleaning crew, but I don't think they bother with my desk. It's too messy," says Margaret Nolan, a senior training analyst who works for a large engineering firm in Orlando. She eats lunch at her desk "at least four days a week."

Nolan's desk is so cluttered that she often sets her lunch on top of piles of papers. "It's very common to have different reports with splatters of what I had yesterday or even the week before," says Nolan, 44. But, Nolan quickly adds, she is no slob. She washes her hands frequently, and to her knowledge has never been ill as a

result of eating at her desk. She advises others who eat at their desks to avoid food with sauces, which "tend to drip."

Bob Ashley, professor of food-service management at the University of Central Florida, explains that humans are able to tolerate "a reasonable amount of germs." But he rarely, if ever, eats at his desk. Just thinking about it makes him uncomfortable. "There's an accumulation over time of people coughing, sneezing and talking over their desks," says Ashley, who teaches at the University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Ashley says cross-contamination is hard to avoid when eating at your desk. The sandwich may lie on a paper wrapper instead of the desktop, but then you pick it up with the same hand that held the phone or typed on the keyboard. Besides, Ashley adds, "If something falls out of the sandwich and lands on the desk, probably 90 percent of us will eat it rather than throw it away."

In addition to frequent hand washing "for at least 20 seconds and rinsing under the hottest water you can stand," Ashley advises using an antibacterial spray to clean the desktop, keyboard, mouse and phone regularly — at least once a week. He also likes the idea of keeping a waterless antibacterial hand cleaner at the desk and using it before eating. If you're eating a sandwich or sub, use the paper wrapper to hold it as you eat, Ashley adds. If you're using a utensil, make sure it's clean and does not touch the desk.

Doug Parker disdains such advice. An Orlando graphical computer programmer, he heats up home-cooked meals in an office microwave and eats at his cluttered desk nearly every work day. "I think the cleanliness thing in this country is overblown," says Parker, 43. "I make it a point to dust my desktop every now and then, and I don't sneeze on my food. I do common-sense things." Parker, who works for an Orlando software manufacturing company, says he eats healthful food and rarely gets sick. "In the work environments I've been in, I see no need to concern myself with bacteria. "The human body is a billion cells with 15 billion bacteria," he adds. "Why is anybody freaking out?"

Handwashing assignment questions

Please answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper. Use complete, quality, and correct sentences that reflect the question in your answer.

1. Tell what percent of workers eat at their desks in 2004 and if this trend is rising or falling in the past two years. Also tell how many workers were surveyed in this study.
2. Tell how many surfaces microbiologist Charles Gerba tested in his workplace study AND which surfaces had the most and least bacteria.
3. The study concluded that desks had thousands more germs per square inch than toilet seats. Why does the author think this is so?
4. Bob Ashley doesn't like the thought of eating on his desk. Why not?
5. Tell what Bob Ashley recommends you do for hand washing AND for weekly cleaning in his workspace?
6. What reason does Doug Parker give to not follow Professor Bob Ashley's advice on cleaning?
7. Who's advice do you think is best, Doug Parker's, or Professor Bob Ashley's? BE sure to tell WHY you think so. -> Remember, the Why is often more important than the WHAT in science