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Hidden Health Risks of the Holiday

by Jacqueline Detwiler

(Forbes) There's a simple reason that cold-and-flu season overlaps with the holiday season. Office parties, religious celebrations and family get-togethers make close contact all but impossible to avoid.



All it takes is one person touching the wrong shopping-cart handle or airplane tray table then sneezing at a Christmas party to produce a home-, school- or office-wide epidemic.

But while many people know to be wary around an obviously ill acquaintance, they may be missing more insidious sources of disease--some cloaked in the festivities of the season.

Sweet, Innocent and Infectious

Children, cute as they may be while waiting in line for Santa or tearing open their presents, are amazingly efficient disease carriers, according to Bill Schaffner M.D., chair of the Department of Preventive Medicine at the Vanderbilt Medical School in Nashville. Children, who have been exposed to fewer viruses and bacteria than adults, develop primary infections more severe and more contagious than most of the infections developed by adults.

"Whether they get the common cold or influenza, youngsters exhale more virus than do adults, and they transmit the virus for longer periods of time, even after they become well," says Schaffner.

Shopping for gifts and holiday travel are other major byways of disease transmission, according to Dean Erdman, team leader of the Respiratory Virus Diagnostics Team at Atlanta's Centers for Disease Control.

"Any place there's crowding, contact and a lot of people touching the same surface is dangerous," he says.

Shopping carts, in particular, are veritable Petri dishes. A 2005 study from University of Arizona found that carts' handles carry fecal bacteria and markers for blood and urine. During the holiday spending period, when the retail rush shortens cart turnover times and winter temperatures allow pathogens to survive longer, practically ensuring leftover human matter will live long enough to infect the next shopper.

Similarly, the surfeit of passengers on major air-travel days increases the number of people using check-in kiosks, seats near the gate and airplane tray tables--all major hubs for disease-spreading microbes.

Close Contact

Interpersonal transmission is the danger in crowded store checkout lines, where people stand well within each other's three-foot breathing space while waiting to pay. Worse, some of those seemingly innocuous customers may be sick and not even know it.

"A main prevention strategy is avoiding people we see coughing and sneezing," says Schaffner, "but that by itself won't work because people can exhale large numbers of viruses for 72 hours before they start showing symptoms."

That's no reason to spend the holiday season in solitary confinement. Actually, home isn't any less germ-free than anywhere else. Food-borne illnesses, often considered a summer affliction, can strike during winter-holiday mealtimes as well.

"Many families only cook whole poultry once or twice a year and aren't as fanatical about keeping the meat out of the temperature danger zone, between 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit, as they are about smaller cuts," says Diane Van, manager of the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline. And though most recognize that not fully cooking the meat can encourage the growth of unwholesome bacteria, many fail to realize the danger inherent in the long thawing process.

"Rushing through the defrosting process by putting the turkey in hot water or leaving it on the counter is incredibly unsafe and can increase the risk of exposure," says Van. A safer way is to defrost the bird in the refrigerator, one day for every four to five pounds.

And once the holiday meal is cooked and presented, it's equally important to eat or pack up the leftovers in two hours or less. Any longer, and bacteria can begin to grow in meats, mayonnaise-based sides and rich holiday drinks containing raw eggs, like homemade eggnog.

Minimizing Risk

To stay healthy, experts emphasize practicing meticulous hygiene. "You cannot wash your hands often enough," says Vanderbilt's Schaffner, who admits to requiring his family to wash immediately upon entering the house.

Van agrees, recommending thorough hand washing with ordinary soap and water for the best protection against food-borne bacteria.

Schaffner also recommends the use of antibacterial hand sanitizers, citing the example of President George W. Bush, who uses them regularly when traveling and constantly shaking hands.

If you get sick anyway, practice good illness etiquette.

"If you're really not feeling well, stay home," says Schaffner. "And if you have to cough or sneeze around people, cough into your elbow--it limits the distribution of germs." Even if you touch a shopping-cart handle a few minutes later.