Germs at the gym: Wipe down each machine?  [1]

Dear Alice,

When you are at the gym exercising do you need to wipe down each machine that you use even if you are not sweating?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Few things are less inviting than heading for an exercise machine at the gym and then noticing it is drenched in someone else’s sweat. Yuck! Even though sweat may be the most visible and moist evidence of what a person leaves behind on the equipment, there are actually many sneaky ways that germs can be transmitted at the gym. Bacterial, fungal, and viral infections can spread via unsanitized gym equipment without any perceivable clues (and even without the presence of sweat). Since the ick factor of sweat isn’t the main purpose of wipe down rules at the gym, equipment can only be considered clean and sanitary after it is wiped down after every use—sweaty or not.

Just as germs can be spread from person-to-person (like shaking someone’s hand after they’ve sneezed into it), some can also be spread through shared equipment (anything from a doorknob to a basketball to a weight machine). Do you ever really know if the person who used the machine before you washed her/his hands after going to the bathroom? Common examples of infections that spread at the gym include noroviruses [2], athlete’s foot [3], and staph infections [4]. In fact, a recent study at a university gym found that before the cleaning staff sanitized everything at closing time, ten percent of the gym equipment had staph on it! That’s a great reminder of why a wipe down is necessary after each use.

As tempting as it may be to think “Hey, I don’t feel sick. I can’t be spreading anything!”, it’s crucial to remember that people can be carriers for different illnesses without actually getting sick themselves. It’s possible to get someone else sick even if you are never aware that you are a carrier. If you really want to go above and beyond, you might consider wiping down the equipment before you use it (protecting you) and after (protecting others). In an ideal gym setting, if everyone does their part and wipes down after use—sweaty or not—there is no need to wipe down before. All this to say, don’t sweat it; you’ll be thanking yourself in the long run for taking a few minutes to make this gym activity routine.

Alice!

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