Should I treat my toilet seat? [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

Could putting a layer of toilet paper on the seat really protect the body from a public toilet seat's germs?

(2) Dear Alice,

So, what's the final word on how possible it is to catch a disease from a toilet seat? I'm in college and live in the dorms, so essentially every bathroom I use is a public one. My school has no sanitary seat covers and uses only commercial-grade one-ply toilet paper. I refuse to believe disgusting microorganisms can't penetrate that flimsy stuff. How likely is it to catch a disease (STD or otherwise) from a public toilet seat, and what's my most practical alternative to the sanitary seat covers?

Answer

Dear Readers,

It's virtually impossible to catch diseases from toilet seats. Whatever microorganisms might lie on the seat's surface very rarely infect or contaminate the skin on your thighs and buttocks. This is especially true of most sexually transmitted infections (STIs) ? the possible, but unlikely, exceptions are crabs (pubic lice), gonorrhea, and skin-to-skin contracted STIs, such as herpes. STIs are mainly spread by having sex and/or genital contact with an infected person.

Because toilet seats are not major culprits in spreading disease, paper or plastic seat covers offer little more than peace of mind. If it makes you feel better, or if the seats are visibly dirty, then continue to use them, but it probably doesn't make sense to have an accident rather than use an uncovered potty.

It is, however, still a good idea to insist on bathroom cleanliness in dorms and other public areas. And washing your hands after using the bathroom is key ? touching your mouth, nose, or eyes after using faucets and door handles contacted by others who are infected could spread things such as colds or intestinal viruses, which can lead to more time on those toilet seats.

Alice!

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