

Harmful health hacks

THEY'RE THE SNEAKY SHORTCUTS THAT MANY OF US LIVE BY IN THESE BUSY TIMES. BUT DON'T BE TOO HASTY, BECAUSE EXPERTS WARN THAT CUTTING CORNERS WITH OUR HEALTH IS RARELY A GOOD IDEA...

With our hands full juggling work, family and home, it's little wonder many of us sometimes cut ourselves some slack when it comes to health and hygiene matters. However, rather than being savvy time-savers, certain popular tips and tricks can play havoc with our wellbeing, *best's* team of experts explains...

THE 'FIVE-SECOND RULE'

Many of us believe it's safe to eat dropped food if it's been swiped off the floor in seconds. But a recent study has found that bacteria will transfer in under one second. 'Food can be contaminated instantly when it comes into contact with harmful pathogens like bacteria and viruses,' says Dr Tatiana Lapa. 'And, passed through contaminated surfaces, some seasonable bugs, such as winter vomiting virus, can spread like wildfire.'

HANDS OFF!
THE AVERAGE PERSON CARRIES OVER 10 MILLION BACTERIA ON THEIR MITTS



A RIGHT SHOWER

When you're rushing to get ready, cleaning your pearly whites while washing can be a convenient time saver. But storing your toothbrush in the shower is a hotbed for germs. 'Rinse and dry your brush after use,' advises Dr Sameer Patel, clinical director at Elleven Dental Practice. 'This will prevent a build-up of airborne bacteria from the toilet, or from condensation caused by showers.'



WATER MISTAKE

More than three million of us wear contact lenses, and the biggest 'quick-fix' error we make is washing them in water. 'It can dry out the lenses, and carries a serious risk of infection, resulting in irritation caused by microorganisms found in non-sterile water,' says optometrist Sarah Farrant. 'Unless lenses are disposable, always clean them in a proper solution, and replace your case as recommended.'

BOTTLE IT UP

Bacteria from your mouth can accumulate on unwashed water bottles, says Rick Hay, anti-ageing food and fitness nutritionist. 'Failure to wash them over time could lead to health problems,' he warns. 'Bacteria like moist environments and thrive in and on your unclean bottle. These germs are bad enough to make you sick – especially with stomach disorders.'



A TOTAL SPECTACLE

Suffering from headaches? It could be down to cleaning your glasses on your clothes. 'The fabric doesn't remove grease on the lens or nosepiece – and a grimy lens can cause the same problems as a wrong prescription lens, such as headaches and fatigue,' says Dr Tatiana Lapa. 'It's also unhygienic. I've seen patients with acne across their nose and cheeks from not cleaning their glasses properly.'



FACE THE FACTS

Cheap, effective and quick, facial wipes are a beauty-bag staple. But before you give yourself a gold star for taking your make-up off before you go to bed, you could be doing your skin more harm than good. 'Many contain detergent-like chemicals or alcohol that can damage the skin, causing dryness and upsetting the delicate pH balance,' warns skincare expert Judy Rocher.

SMEAR REMINDER

If it feels like a while since your last smear test, call your GP to see if you're due one. Women should have smears every three years until the age of 50, then every five years until the age of 65.

SKIPPING THE SOAP

A third of people don't use soap when washing their hands, but 'a quick rinse without soap won't do the job,' warns Dr Lisa Ackerley. 'Soap encourages rubbing, helping to dislodge germs. If you've just handled raw chicken, for example, you could have bacteria such as campylobacter on your hands. If transferred to your mouth, this might cause illnesses like stomach upsets.'



Ask me anything...



GOT A PRESSING HEALTH QUESTION? ASK DR ELLIE CANNON

Removing a birthmark

Q My baby grandson has a very noticeable birthmark on his arm. Would we have to go private to get this removed?

A Cosmetic surgery to remove skin lesions can be performed on the NHS, although the mark has to be causing severe distress or pain. Birthmarks vary in type and structure, and many types get much smaller and fade as babies get older. It may be much less noticeable in time. Surgery on anyone should be very carefully considered; your grandson may not need or want it when he is older.

What is metformin?

Q I'm about to start taking metformin for diabetes. Can you tell me a bit about it?

A Commonly prescribed for people with type 2 diabetes, metformin helps your body respond better to the natural hormone insulin that your body

makes to control sugar – and it's very effective at doing so. One of the common side effects is stomach trouble, such as gas, discomfort and changes to your bowels. It's also important to get your vitamin B12 tested while you're on metformin, as it can alter levels.

My periods have restarted

Q My periods stopped when I was 48, with no bad symptoms, but I'm now 51 and have started bleeding again. Is that normal?

A No, it really isn't, and you must book an urgent appointment with your GP. To start bleeding such a long time after your periods have stopped can be a sign of something serious in the womb or vagina, such as cancer. Most often with your symptoms it would be a benign (non-cancerous) issue such as a polyp, which is a harmless growth. But it must be checked out.

Best's GP, Ellie Cannon, works in a busy inner-city practice. The mum-of-two specialises in family health, and appears on Sky TV.

Want Dr Ellie to solve your problem? Email danielle.southwood@hearst.co.uk with 'Dr Ellie' in the subject line.