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Paper towels in home bathrooms? Hype or necessity?

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Germ avoidance is a growth industry.

Dozens of new products for the home, from bathroom paper towels to "touchless" hand-soap dispensers, help protect us from bacteria and viruses, according to their marketing. But many consumers wonder whether the potential health benefits from these products justify the cost, resource consumption and waste.

Q: Paper towels to dry hands in home bathrooms? Really?

A: Kimberly-Clark is pouring millions of dollars into advertising to persuade Americans to get rid of cloth hand towels in the bathroom and switch over to their new Kleenex brand single-use, disposable paper towels. The Kimberly-Clark website and other marketing includes this statement: "The CDC (the federal government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines for hand washing recommend hand drying with a single-use towel."

Q: Is that statement true?

A: Partially. The CDC website (www.cdc.gov) includes materials for various audiences, and in most cases where they make that recommendation it refers to hand washing "in health-care settings" such as hospitals. In a few instances, that recommendation appears to include all hand washing. However, on some parts of the CDC website it also says that drying hands at home with "a clean towel," not just a single-use towel, is fine.

Q: What do doctors think about disposable bathroom towels and other new home germ-fighting products?

A: Doctors' opinions vary widely on hygiene issues, but some doctors say people may be going overboard trying to prevent germs.

If a family member has a virus, "you're going to be exposed to those germs regardless" of whether you use paper bathroom towels or a touchless soap dispenser, says Dr. Sheela Sathyanarayana, a children's environmental-health expert and researcher who sees patients at several Seattle hospitals.

"This is marketing based on fear," adds Dr. Wendy Sue Swanson, a local pediatrician who writes the popular Seattle Mama Doc blog for Seattle Children's hospital. "You're not going to sterilize your body," she says, no matter how hard you try.

Both doctors emphasize that germs are everywhere, not just on a cloth towel. But in your home, you don't have the potential exposure to problematic germs that you have in a public place.

Q: So how should I dry my hands in my bathroom?

A: Especially if someone in the home has a cold or the flu, you may want to use separate cloth towels for each family member. Wash your towels frequently in hot water and make sure they get completely dry between uses to reduce the amount of bacteria on them.

Q: What about all the "antibacterial" liquid hand soaps?

A: Swanson, who has two young children, says she does not use antibacterial soaps in her home because they are unnecessary and may do more harm than good. Sathyanarayana agrees, pointing out that many of those products contain triclosan, a chemical linked to several health problems and currently under review by the federal government.

Q: So should we just give up in the fight against germs?

A: No, but you can fight that battle other ways besides spending extra money on questionable products that consume resources, such as touchless soap dispensers requiring batteries.

The basic tips you hear over and over are still the best. Wash hands frequently and properly, especially at work or in public places. When you cough, do it in your sleeve, not your hand.

In the greater scheme of things, preventing illness ranks ahead of preventing waste. You shouldn't feel bad if you choose to be extra careful about hygiene, especially when you have vulnerable people in your household such as infants or the elderly.

But you also shouldn't feel compelled to buy all the new products marketed as germ-busters, since some of them might not even work. When it comes to those products, do your wallet and the planet a favor and be a waste-buster instead.

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