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Cloth vs. paper vs. dryers: How to be clean and green when you wipe your hands

By Tom Watson

Sometimes the most mundane environmental choices are the most perplexing.

For example, take the decision that's right there in your hands several times a day: What's the best way to wipe them off?

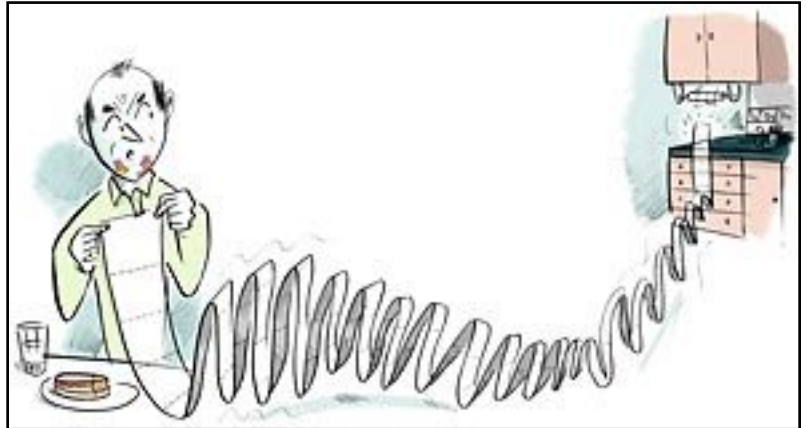
Paper napkins and paper towels are ubiquitous in American kitchens. But many of us would rather not use all that paper — which does come from trees, after all — just to dry or clean off our hands.

If everyone in Washington state used paper towels 10 times a week, that would result in 33,876 tons of paper-towel waste a year, according to the waste calculator on the King County EcoConsumer Web site.

The whole cloth

For most of us, hygiene trumps concerns about the environment, so if we're going to use something other than paper, it needs to be sanitary.

As one example, there does not appear to be any evidence that using cloth napkins at home is less safe than



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Resources

King County EcoConsumer Waste Calculator: www.KCecoconsumer.com

Feminist Mormon Housewives — cloth napkins: www.feministmormonhousewives.org/?p=1657 Mitsubishi Jet Towel: www.mitsubishijettowel.com Natural Resources Defense Council guide, paper towels and napkins: www.nrdc.org/land/forests/gtissue.asp

using paper products. To reduce the impact of washing the cloth napkins, many people even use the same napkin for more than one meal.

Cloth napkins most likely spread much less bacteria than the household sponge sitting on the kitchen counter, primarily because bacteria need moisture to grow. A cloth napkin used sparingly over several meals will usually stay pretty dry.

The Feminist Mormon Housewives Web site features a long, informative exchange about cloth napkins, extolling their environmental virtues and providing tips. For example, to make it easy for family members to identify their own napkins, use a distinctive napkin ring (which kids could make, as a craft project) for each person.

As an alternative to paper towels when you have a big spill, cut up old clothes for rags. You can use a cloth kitchen towel to wipe your hands, but change it every day or two and never use it to clean surfaces or if you have touched raw meat.

Going public

At restrooms you may have two choices: paper towels or a hand dryer. Here are some things to consider:

- No definitive evidence seems to exist about whether paper towels or hand dryers are more hygienic in public restrooms. A lone British study in 1993, funded by the paper-towel industry, found that people who used dryers had more bacteria on their hands afterward than those who used paper towels, possibly because the dryers harbor and distribute bacteria. But the hand-dryer industry disputes that study.
- Another complication: The bacteria you might pick up opening the restroom door when you leave. Some people grab an extra paper towel, use it to open the door, and throw it on the floor if a trash can isn't handy. Though it seems like overkill, some paper companies now offer a restroom door-side tissue dispenser and trash receptacle, for just that purpose.
- From an environmental standpoint, paper towels obviously produce substantial paper waste, but hand dryers use significant electricity.

Although contradictory claims abound on this topic, a 2007 life cycle analysis by the Climate Conservancy found that using a hand dryer produces fewer climate-changing greenhouse gases than using paper towels.

Roll-cloth towel machines, championed by environmentalists in the past, have become increasingly rare, probably because they tend to jam. The washing and bleaching required for cloth towels also diminish their green credentials.

- Hand dryers in restrooms don't win any popularity contests either. The biggest complaint is that it takes two or three times longer to use them than paper towels.

But a new generation of high-speed hand dryers may turn the tide. For example, the futuristic Mitsubishi Jet Towel uses pressurized air to squeegee the water off your hands in less than 10 seconds.

To try one of these new-age hand dryers, visit the restrooms at Blue C Sushi at University Village. The Jet Towel and other new high-speed hand dryers claim to be much more energy efficient than older models.

Relying on the 3 Rs

To minimize hand-wiping impacts, go back to the basics of "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." Using cloth napkins at home covers the reuse angle. To reduce, consider the "pick-a-size" type of paper towels, which makes it easy to tear off a smaller piece. In restrooms, try to use one paper towel instead of two.

You can also make a difference by choosing recycled paper towels and napkins. A recent Grist Magazine usability test found that Seventh Generation Natural and Whole Foods' 365 Everyday Value brands were the best-performing recycled-content paper towels for the home. Those brands do not use chlorine bleach, another environmental plus.

The good news is that we have plenty of options these days to reduce this paper waste. So pick one or more and give yourself a hand.

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