



# Your Purse Could Be Making You Sick

A Microbiologist Found Millions of Germs on Purses

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Women rarely go anywhere without a purse, which means that if a woman enters a place full of germs, so does her bag. That could mean she ends up carrying around microbes that could make her sick all day long.

Microbiologist Chuck Gerba researches where organisms that make us sick lurk and lately he says he has found that germs gather on the outside of a woman's purse, especially on the bottom.

"We found fecal bacteria you normally find on the floor of restroom," he said. "We found bacteria that can cause skin infections on the bottom of purses. What's more amazing is the large numbers we find on the bottom of purses, which indicates that they can be picking up a lot of other germs like cold viruses or viruses that cause diarrhea."

Using a hand-held germ meter, Gerba demonstrated how much bacteria can grow on a woman's purse for ABC News, with results that ranged from scary to downright terrifying. Health experts worry when the meter reads over 200, which means thousands of bacteria are present.

He found thousands of germs on one woman's purse. She bought her bag about a month ago and Gerba's measurements showed her purse also carried thousands of germs. ABC News is not naming the women who participated in order to protect their identities.

"I'll probably just get a new one," she said.

Yet another woman has been carrying a handbag around for years and Gerba said that he

found "hundreds of thousands of germs on the surface."

Gerba found about half a million bacteria on the bottom of one woman's large bag.

## **Subways for Germs**

Each time ABC News and Gerba ran an instant field test and later a lab test on swabs from the outside bottom of 10 women's purses, every single one had at least some bacteria, most had tens of thousands and a few were saturated with millions. One even had 6.7 million bacteria. Half of the bags tested positive for coliform bacteria, which indicated the possible presence of human or animal waste.

Many women ABC News interviewed were not concerned.

"It doesn't bother me. I don't touch the bottom of my purse," the woman with the large bag said.

But Gerba said that women who carry around bags with them at all times should be concerned.

"It matters because you can move germs that can cause illness from one location to another," he said. "You can later touch that purse and get them on your hands, or you could put your purse near a food preparation area and transfer germs to areas you may touch during food preparation."

Some women argued that they do not lick the bottom of their purses, so they should not be in danger of getting sick, but it is very easy to unknowingly transfer germs. For example, whatever touched the bottom of your purse touches you when you grab it. If you eat a sandwich soon after that, the germs go right into your mouth.

"The purses are really becoming subways for micro organisms," Gerba said. "They're being transferred from one location to another. So it's just like germ 'public transportation.' I'm afraid to touch them. You know, I know too much. I'll never become a purse snatcher, believe me."

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