

**WHILE THE GYM IS OFTEN CONSIDERED SYNONYMOUS WITH GOOD-HEALTH, INVISIBLE GERMS MAY BE LURKING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF YOUR YOGA MAT AND CAUSING A HOST OF ISSUES – FROM FOOT FUNGI TO THE COMMON FLU. AVOID THE BLEGH FACTOR THIS WINTER WITH OUR EXPERT’S TIPS AND TRICKS FOR SICK-PROOFING YOUR WORKOUT ZONE.**

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# GYM GERMS

## KNOW THY ENEMY

Ensuring your workout space (be it commercial or home gym) is as clean as your deadlift, can be difficult; what is out of sight is so often out of mind. So what exactly is breeding in amongst the sweat and grime of the communal locker rooms, and what can you do to keep the germs at bay?

“Your workout spaces’ mixture of humidity and perspiration creates a haven for many common viruses, germs and forms of bacteria. A shared workout space means shared equipment, and this is how common viral illnesses, such as the flu and gastroenteritis, can be passed from one person to another,” says Dr Ryan Harvey, deputy medical director at House Call Doctor ([housecalldoctor.com.au](http://housecalldoctor.com.au)).

The spaces which put you at the greatest risks of particular germs depends on their type and modes of transmission.

### BACTERIA AND INFECTIONS:

Staphylococcus is a bacteria that can be transmitted between humans through direct or indirect contact, and can cause some not-so-pleasant skin infections. According to a study by the Infectious Diseases Society of America, people who play contact sport are more likely to carry the superbug methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). Researchers analysed the time it took for college athletes who played a range of contact sports to be colonised with staphylococcus and its varieties, and found that athletes acquired the bacteria more quickly than non-athletes because of the skin-to-



skin contact that was often made with cuts. Even if you don't play contact sport, you may not be entirely safe: bacteria can be spread through indirect contact. Think a cut on your hand before lifting that barbell.

"Many germs in workout spaces are found on equipment that is commonly handled or touched, such as yoga mats, free weights and the handles on cardio equipment," explains Dr Harvey.

"Bacteria exists in most environments and on most bodies. As exercise provides an opportunity for us to break our skin – through lifting equipment, carpet burn or small lacerations – it's likely that bacteria can get in and cause infection."

#### **VIRUSES:**

"Unlike bacteria, viruses are transferred by people coughing or not washing their hands properly after using bathroom facilities. These unhygienic practices cause contaminants to be left on equipment that can lead to people contracting respiratory and gastroenteritis viruses," says Dr Harvey.

"When someone coughs, a virus becomes vaporised, allowing it to be inhaled by another person. Even if the person covers their mouth while they cough, a virus can be transferred to the equipment they use, before being contracted by the next person if they touch their mouth or face."

Respiratory, influenza and gastroenteritis are common virus types contracted in communal spaces, according to Dr Harvey.

#### **FUNGUSES:**

Fungus grows in warm, damp and dark environments – think bathroom walls and floors, and the surface of showers – so humid workout areas such as hot yoga studios can allow fungi to multiply. Fungal infections such as *tinea corporis* (ringworm) and *tinea pedis* (athlete's foot) are also common among athletes, usually appearing as red, cracked and scaly skin similar to a rash. Sweaty feet in enclosed trainers can be a breeding ground for fungus, but can be minimised by wearing sock fabrics that don't trap moisture, according to Dr Harvey.

## CLEAN SLATE

Before you skip the training sesh out of pure fear for your health, you will be glad to know that most illnesses or infections contracted at the gym are easily treatable.

"If you do contract a skin infection it can be quite debilitating, so you will probably require antibiotics. However, the treatment for infections is just a simple analgesia, rest and keeping up your fluids," says Dr Harvey. "In most cases, fungal skin infections you acquired from a workout space can be treated with anti-fungal creams available at pharmacies."

And no matter how many sniffles you unluckily acquire, fear not: Dr Harvey assures there is little risk of damage to your immune system, with your body specifically designed to fight off germs in its environment. In other words, don't ditch the gym just yet.

"The benefits of exercise far outweigh the small risk of contracting any of the illnesses mentioned. By not working out you are doing more harm to your health and immune system," says Dr Harvey.

"The easiest and most effective way to avoid catching or spreading germs in workout spaces is to practice basic hygiene."

Keeping your hands clean in environments where cuts and injuries are common – especially after coughing or using the bathroom – is key to minimising the risk of contracting and spreading infection and illness, according to Harvey. Ensuring wounds are covered by either band-aid or clothing, showering after every workout and not sharing personal equipment such as towels and razors can also help.

The most important thing is to make sure your workout space is undergoing a regular cleaning schedule so that bacteria and germs are not given the opportunity to populate. Wipe down all surfaces of your equipment with soap or disinfectant spray before and after use, and wear flip flops if using communal showers to avoid any hidden nasties.



# EXPERT ADVICE

Take a cue from the experts and bring cleanliness to your own home gym with these tips from Bodhi & Ride cycle studio owner, Michaela Fellner (bodhiandride.com.au):

## 1. CLEAN, CLEAN AND MORE CLEAN

Even the places you might not expect. Michaela disinfects equipment and mops the floor every night to clean up sweat, but also wipes down hand weights and mirrors – any nook and cranny where germs can hide! Try making your own at-home solution with eucalyptus oil and water.

## 2. WASH SWEAT TOWELS REGULARLY

While the main ingredients in sweat include sodium, chloride and potassium, none of these are responsible for the all too familiar stench – that you can blame on bacteria. “The used sweat towels we provide at the studio smell unpleasant after a few hours. That’s because the bacteria in the sweat starts to break down the protein into acids,” says Fellner.

If your commercial workout space offers complimentary sweat towels, ensure they are being steamed by a specialist cleaning company so that the bacteria is completely killed off. If you are an at-home kinda gal, wash your sweat towels after every use to avoid any ickiness.

## 3. CLEAN SWEATY GYM CLOTHES

When it comes to hygiene, you can’t neglect the clothes that are literally on your back while you’re sweating up a storm. If you want to ensure you remove the terrible smell of ammonia that lingers in your gym gear, try Fellner’s hot tip:

“White vinegar is a powerful odour neutraliser and works wonders on sweaty activewear fabrics. Fill your washing machine with water, then add 1/3 cup of white vinegar. Soak and then wash as normal,” she suggests.

## 4. DON'T FORGET YOUR SHOES

Use shoe deodorant or spray-on fabric deodoriser and antibacterial spray on your trainers to keep them clean and remove any odours. You can also create a solution of soap and water to scrub your shoes clean, or wipe with bleach. Be sure to air out and dry (you’ve learnt what grows in damp places, need we remind you).



Say goodbye to bacteria with these machine washable yoga mats. They’re made from ethically grown tree rubber so you’ll be dually germ-free and enviro-friendly. **MoveActive Luxe Eco Yoga Mat**, \$95, [moveactive.com.au](http://moveactive.com.au)

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Protect your bare feet from the dangerous bacteria and fungi creeping around the Bikram studio floor with a pair of MoveActive yoga socks – they’re made from cotton with built-in non-slip silicone grips, and come in super cute styles and colours! **Non Slip Socks**, \$16.50, [moveactive.com.au](http://moveactive.com.au)



3

Delete any sign you worked out (other than the visible booty gains) by chucking this compact odour neutraliser into your gym bag. The 100 per cent natural and organic paste is easily applied while you’re on-the-go, and won’t irritate your skin or the other gym goer’s noses. **NO PONG anti odourant**, \$5.95, [nopong.com](http://nopong.com)

Keen to keep your at-home workout space tidy? This handy housekeeping tin will ensure your cleaning products are kept within easy reach. Living Nostalgia French Grey **Housekeeping Tin**, \$41.56, [kitchencraft.co.uk](http://kitchencraft.co.uk)



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Keep your hands squeaky clean and deter those pesky germs from your dumb bells with **Squeakie’s 100 per cent natural hand sanitiser**. If you’re a World Health Organisation devotee, you’ll be pleased to know that it meets the WHO guidelines! \$11.95, [squeakie.com.au](http://squeakie.com.au)