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Getting a 'grippe' on germy handles

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That grocery cart you're putting your food, handbag and toddler into? It's teeming with germs.

Consider the handle. It's been touched by untold numbers of hands that have changed diapers, mopped up runny noses, picked up packages of raw chicken and meat, and been coughed on, sneezed in and drooled on.

Bacteria and viruses such as *E. coli*, *Staphylococcus*, *Salmonella* and influenza bugs can live on grocery carts, scientists say. Though they caution not to get too panicked about the thought, experts say it is possible to catch something from the carts if conditions are right.

A start-up company in Green Bay, Wis., thinks it has a remedy.

PureCart Systems, a sort of drive-through washer that sanitizes grocery carts, made its debut last November.

It works by coating the carts with a safe mist of a peroxide-based disinfectant. The solution is the same as one used to clean dialysis machines and poultry processors.

Though the system is up and running in only two locations, President Jim Kratowicz, one of PureCart's founders, said the company is "in talks" with every major grocery chain in the country, plus retailers in Korea and Canada.

Many grocers, including Kroger Co., offer sanitizing wipes for customers who want to de-germ their carts.

"In concept, the wipes are great," said Kratowicz. "But, in essence, customers are doing the work. If you go to a restaurant, you don't have to clean the table before you eat."

The PureCart washers cost about \$10,000 each, but Kratowicz said to get the system into stores, he would install the units for free, at least initially.

The disinfectant solution costs about \$1,000 a month, Kratowicz said. Wipes cost 3 cents to 8 cents apiece, he said.

Other products exist to help customers avoid those seemingly ghastly grocery cart germs. Among them, a sanitary handle cover just for shopping carts, which sells for about \$10.95, and a \$30 fabric seat cover to keep your little one from touching the cart.

Experts say it's always good to limit exposure to nasty germs, especially the flu bug in winter. But they caution about overreacting to germs and overdoing the antibiotics.

"In our culture, we tend to be a light switch and not a rheostat," said Dr. Greg Poland, a professor of medicine and infectious diseases and director of the vaccine research group at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

"In a society where people bathe two or three times a day, where TV is crowded with ads for kitchen cleaners, sprays, wipes and bleaches, there's an aspect of all this that goes way overboard," he said. "There needs to be a balance, in my opinion."