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Can Your Smartphone Spread The Flu?



Robert Glatter, MD Contributor ⓘ

Pharma & Healthcare

I cover breaking news in medicine, med tech and public health

As the flu season rages on, most of us try to practice good hygiene by washing our hands, avoiding close contact with others who are ill, and getting a flu shot. But another potential vector for the spread of the flu that has recently been discussed in the media may be your smartphone.

The truth is that most people rarely clean or wash their smartphone, occasionally share it with friends, and may touch it to their mouths while they are speaking on it. One issue, however, is that wiping the screen down with strong cleaners which contain alcohol, ammonia or detergents may cause damage to the electronic components of the phone itself by leaking along the edges of the glass cover.

That said, most physicians and public health experts recommend people to stick to the basics for flu prevention: washing your hands thoroughly, getting a flu shot, staying home for work or school to avoid spreading the virus, and vigorously cleaning surfaces that you frequently touch.



English: SHARP Smartphone SH-12C Front
日本語: AQUOS PHONE SH-12C 前面 (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

One of the most common surfaces we touch everyday happens to be our smartphone. Countless times throughout the day we pick it up, put it down, wherever we may be--even in the bathroom where the potential to spread bacteria and viruses may be the greatest. The suggestion to clean your smartphone may potentially be an important consideration during this current flu epidemic.

In truth, the most common way that the flu is spread is the result of person-to-person contact, as well as from dirty hands that touch your face- especially your eyes, nose and mouth that become portals of entry for the virus. It turns out the average person touches their face up to 16 times per hour-hence the concern.

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There have been a few studies that have examined whether cell phones can truly spread the flu; from a practical standpoint, smartphones could potentially play a role in spread based on how often our faces come in contact with our cellphones. But the truth is that peoples' hands are a more important vector, especially in an office setting with lots of handles and doorknobs as well as shared computer surfaces- Unless you share your phone with others, the risk of spreading bacteria and flu isn't as concerning as transmission from your hands as the vector.

AT and T's chief medical officer, Dr. Geeta Nayyar still chose to issue a recent statement warning that cellphones can easily spread the flu because they represent a device that repeatedly comes in contact with the face. She is urging people to disinfect their cell phones regularly, use hands free headsets and avoid using their cellphones in restrooms.

Sharing cell phones is not a good practice at anytime, but especially during the flu season, as the virus can survive on surfaces from 2-8 hours hours, according to

the [CDC](#). And MRSA, (a staph bacteria resistant to common antibiotics) can be present and survive on surfaces for up to 8-9 days based on studies.

If you do share your phone, it should be cleaned with a disinfectant. The only problem is that cell phone manufacturers recommend against using strong chemicals including ammonia, alcohol, or other detergents which could damage the components and electronics in the phone.

For instance, on [Apple's](#) web site, regarding the iPhone, it says not to “use window cleaners, household cleaners, aerosol sprays, solvents, alcohol, ammonia, or abrasives to clean the phones. Apple warns that these chemicals could damage the screen. Apple recommends the use of a “soft slightly damp lint free cloth”- hardly a way to clean or disinfect a phone. Samsung has similar recommendations for its touch-screen phones, and advises in the owners's manual not to use” harsh chemicals, cleaning solvents, or strong detergents”. It recommends wiping down the phone with a soft cloth slightly dampened in a mild soap and water solution”.

S.C Johnson has apparently started offering phone and electronic friendly sanitizers, which would not damage the phone's surface or electronics.

The bottom line is this: what infectious potential does your phone actually represent as a vector to spread the flu? The truth is that the answer is not clear at this time, and actually doing a study to determine its role in spreading the flu virus would be quite problematic. Overall, if you had to evaluate your overall risk, keeping your hands clean is the more important concern.

One previous [study](#) published in 2010, found that viruses could be easily transferred between your fingers and glass surfaces, similar to the surface on a smart phone. Using a hands-free headset or placing it on speakerphone would be a simple way to avoid handling and touching the smartphone surface.

The probability of actually catching the flu or a bacterial infection as a result of cell phone contact is actually dependent on a number of factors how long the viruses or bacteria have been on the phone surface. In the first 15-20 minutes, there is a greater chance of acquiring the virus or bacteria-- assuming you touch your eyes, nose or mouth, or contact open skin or mucous membranes- and there is adherence to the cell surface. The risk decreases significantly after 1-3 hours after contact.

Advice to minimize spread of bacteria or viruses from smartphones

1. Do not share cell phones with others. Wash your hands before handling your phone if you did share it with someone.
2. Keep your phone out of the hands of your children--they can be significant vectors for flu spread
3. If another person has touched or handled it, do not touch it for a few hours. Wash your hands or use a gel based cleaner before picking it up again. Use a hands-free set, ear piece or speaker phone instead.
4. Use a plastic film or cover for the surface. You can discard the old cover and replace it to minimize infectious potential of the phone's surface.

I am an emergency physician on staff at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, where I have practiced for the past 15 years. I also serve as an adviser and editor to Medscape Emergency Medicine, an educational portal for physicians, and an affiliate of WebMD. My other time i... MORE