

CLEAN SPEAK

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THE ART AND SCIENCE OF CLEANING

Blowing Hot Air?

What is better: Paper or air dryers? The answer may surprise you.

Ask Alexandra Petri over at the Washington Post what she thinks of hand dryers, and here is what she has to say:

“Everything about them is terrible. Hot air dryers dry your hand with all the force of six gnomes gently whispering at you. They are like sticking your hand into the mouth of a panting dog.”

We can conclude that Petri does not like hand dryers. But does science agree?

It would depend on the source. Most studies conclude that paper does have an advantage over air dryers when it comes to hygiene, but some pro air dryer studies say there is no difference at all, or that it simply depends on how long a person keeps their hands under the flow of hot air.

Reviews of existing studies have concluded the following:

1. Towels dry hands quicker than air dryers, and about the same as jet dryers. Since people are impatient in the bathroom when it comes to drying hands, and wet hands are much more likely to pass bacteria to or from touch surfaces, towels and jet dryers are preferable in this situation.
2. The lion's share of studies show that non-reusable paper towels are up to three times more effective at reducing bacteria on hands than standard air dryers. Jet dryers come closer to paper, but paper still wins the race.
3. Cross-contamination is a big factor. The force of air from dryers spread bacteria from one to two meters away depending on the type. Spread from a paper towel dispenser is next to nil, however some paper dispensers have handles, which present an issue for

cross-contamination, so make sure to elbow that handle rather than grasp it with your wet hands.

4. Dryers have a slight (and I mean slight) advantage in the environmental and cost department, although the environmental benefits vary depending on dryer efficiency and how the electricity is sourced (e.g. coal power... not so good). Some sources say that it takes more energy to run the dryers than to manufacture the paper, so the environmental difference is not as great as hyped, and electricity costs come so close to paper as to make the difference negligible.
5. Bathroom patrons prefer paper. People typically do not want to spend more than 20 seconds drying their hands (that is being generous), and pro air dryer studies were recommending up to 45 seconds as sufficient drying time to get the bacterial count down to paper levels. Many people also view towels as necessary for doing things such as turning off taps and opening bathroom doors to minimize recontamination.

The edutainment show, Mythbusters, did a fun and informative episode that looked into the paper versus dryer debate, and they concluded that paper was indeed better, reducing bacterial load up to 71%, compared to the dryer's 23%. They also clearly demonstrated how far an air dryer spread germs through the bathroom.

The conclusion we can reach is that, when you have a choice, use paper. Otherwise, wash your hands with soap and a lot of friction (sing “Happy Birthday” twice), then make sure you dry your hands completely. Dry hands are the key to clean hands. ■



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