

Why Coughing Into Your Elbow Is Wrong

Coughing or sneezing into your sleeve elbow may result in more disease than it prevents. Read why. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

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You likely grew up, as I did, being told to cover your mouth and nose with your hand when you cough or sneeze. That has changed.

We are now told to cough or sneeze into the elbow of a sleeve. One commercial currently on television shows a woman carrying a laundry basket and coughing into her shoulder. All in the aid of avoiding the spread of "germs."

Here's the problem. Rather, a combination of them. Let's begin with the objective, confining germs that would normally be spread into the air by coughing or sneezing.

When you cover your mouth and nose with your hand, you prevent most of what comes out of them from reaching anyone else. Witness the fact that sometimes your hand got a bit wet. (I know, the subject is unpleasant, but the title should have warned you.) When you cough or sneeze into your sleeve elbow, a good deal of what comes out of your mouth or nose will miss the fabric.

When you cover your mouth with your hand to cough or sneeze, you can wash your hand. You should wash them anyway, several times a day, so that should not be an imposition. If you have a cold or cough, you can carry disposable tissues.

When you cough or sneeze into your sleeve, it's highly unlikely you will change your clothing until a much later time. What is highly likely is that you will cough or sneeze again and use the same sleeve. When you cough or sneeze, the immediate reflex is to inhale to replace the expelled air. You do that before turning away from your sleeve, which means that you then inhale your own germs.

The whole purpose of using disposable tissues rather than the old style handkerchief was so you could avoid breathing in the same germs you blew into the handkerchief last time. Most of us got that message: don't inhale the germs you sneezed or coughed out last time.

As the saying goes, do the math. Coughing or sneezing into your sleeve causes as much as 90 percent of germs that may exit your mouth or nose to escape into the air around you. Always at least 50 percent escapes.

If you have a colleague who smokes, ask that person to inhale from a cigarette then blow the smoke back out again into their sleeve, as a person would when sneezing or coughing. It may shock you how little smoke sticks to the fabric and how much makes its way into the air. The example isn't perfect, but it will serve its purpose.

People in North America were asked to switch from cloth handkerchiefs to disposable paper tissues a few decades ago to avoid having us breathe our own germs when we coughed or sneezed into handkerchiefs. The same thinking still applies.

The more often a person with a cold or cough expels air into their sleeve, believing that they are doing right by those around them, the more people will catch colds and coughs from them. And the more often those same people may re-infect themselves. The more people get colds and coughs, the more OTC (over the counter) medications the drug manufacturers will sell.

When we learn our health habits from the people who make medicines, we must understand that these companies have far less interest in our health than in our cash, their bottom lines.

We have good reason to believe that coughing or sneezing into our own sleeves may cause more disease than it avoids. Who wins with that scenario?

Bill Allin is the author of ***Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, an easy to read guidebook for teachers and parents who want to teach the right lessons to their children at the best possible times to aid their development.
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