

Irish Independent

Lunching at your desk is a recipe for getting ill

EATING lunch at the desk will never seem the sensible option again.

While we pound our computer keyboards and take bites from a sandwich, we have little idea that a host of bacteria thriving under our fingertips is being transferred to our food.

Scientists have uncovered an assortment of bugs and viruses on computer keyboards that are far worse than any "virus" that might affect our hard drive.

The average keyboard is a blackspot of filthy bacteria, infected with a larger host of germs than even a toilet seat or a rubbish bin- with each square inch containing a staggering 3,295 germs.

As they continue to live and breed, they cause sicknesses among users that range from skin disease and rashes to pneumonia, hepatitis and herpes.

The flu virus can live for 50 minutes on a computer keyboard or ATM machine, while bugs such as listeria and salmonella can linger for up to 24 hours. Particular bacteria hotspots are the space bar and vowel keys because they are most often used.

And while many computer users will be aware of assorted crumbs from lunchtime snacks littering their keyboard, much more horrifying debris is lurking - in the form of urine, blood, pubic hair, nasal droppings, saliva and worms.

Dr Thomas Quigley, director of the science and technical department at the cross-border food safety body, SafeFood, says unclean hands are the most important mechanism in transferring food-borne diseases.

A recent study carried out by SafeFood in Northern Ireland revealed that a quarter of those people surveyed who had used the toilet and were on their way to restaurants still had bugs on their hands coming out of the toilet.

Dr Quigley advises office workers not to eat at their desks but to take a walk and wash their hands before sitting down to their lunch.

Ian Donnelly, sales director with Alpa CC IT Solutions, an office and computer-cleaning company based in Bray, Co Wicklow, says they were recently called in by a company to clean and sanitise computers and phones after a measles epidemic swept through an entire office floor.

The company, which serves most of the country's leading banks, is also regularly called in on an emergency basis to sanitise equipment before a threatened flu epidemic.

"Cleaning keyboards and phones cuts out absenteeism in companies, and this is proven - we've helped companies cut their absenteeism bill by 75pc," he says.

Mr Donnelly says office workers would never eat lunch at their desk again if they saw what comes out of the average keyboard.

"Companies sometimes say to me: 'Oh, our keyboards are grand', but then I ask them if they mind if I give them a shake. They are disgusted to see what comes out.

"Our workers find bits of nails, nostril hair, eyelashes, particles of ham when they're doing their cleaning - it's sickening stuff."

Nicola Anderson