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THE A-HED Restroom Decor: Germy Doorknobs Inspire Inventors *You Wash Your Hands But Since Others Don't, Check Out SanitGrasp*

A few years ago, after using a filthy gas-station bathroom strewn with soggy toilet paper, Matthew Fulkerson dried his hands under a wall-mounted blower. Then he realized he was trapped: How to leave without touching the door handle? "Everything is focused on clean hands as you exit," he says. "But then someone else doesn't wash their hands and you have to touch the same door handle."

So, in 2005, he invented the SanitGrasp, an L-shaped handle open at the top that can be pulled with the forearm or wrist.

Germaphobes already have antibacterial soap and carry around bottles of Purell to sanitize their hands, but they still must face the most feared of fixtures: a public-restroom door handle that may be teeming with bacteria. To minimize contamination, Chris Martinez, a construction manager in Orlando, Fla., uses what he calls the "pinky pull." Amber Vasquez, 28 years old, a Chicago Web site developer, grabs the handle with a paper towel. If the bathroom just has blow dryers, "I'll get the toilet paper," she says.

A number of entrepreneurs are trying to make their fortunes by cleaning up the doorknob or trying to eliminate contact with it altogether. At Stonewood Grill & Tavern, a restaurant chain in North Carolina and Florida, customers can open the restroom door by waving a hand in front of a sensor. Other restaurants are installing foot pulls and wrist latches.

Even government has gotten involved. Last year, Massachusetts state Rep. James Vallee introduced a bill on behalf of a constituent that would require all public-bathroom doors to open outward. That way, one could use a shoulder or rear end to open the door.

Airborne infections are commonly spread by coughs and sneezes. But germs also can survive on surfaces for hours or days. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is the best way to contain infections.

In an August 2007, study sponsored by the Soap and Detergent Association and the American Society for Microbiology, 34% of males observed at public bathrooms across the country didn't wash their hands; 12% of females didn't wash up. "As we continue to observe: Guys need to step up to the sink," says Brian Sansoni, a spokesman for the soap makers' group.

William Schaffner, vice president of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases and chairman of the department of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, says avoiding germs is impossible. "We live surrounded with germs and germs are in us all the time," Dr. Schaffner says. "It's good to be clean, but one can become obsessive." He says he doesn't avoid touching doorknobs.

Big Seller Yet hygiene is a big seller. There are now antimicrobial bedsheets and bacteria-killing carpets. Last year, American Standard introduced a toilet with an antimicrobial coating that's suppose to last indefinitely. At Busch's, a supermarket chain in Michigan, stores have disinfecting wipes near the shopping carts that people push around so customers can clean off the handlebars.

Hygiene has also moved into the office. During the recent remodeling of its headquarters, Avfuel, an Ann Arbor, Mich., supplier of aviation fuel and services, an executive asked whether the bathroom doors could open outward so that squeamish employees wouldn't have to touch handles. In the end, the company ordered SanitGrasp. "Most of our senior management is a bunch of germaphobes," says Ron Cagle, a corporate credit manager who oversaw the remodeling.

Avoiding Contact Many people avoid contact with bathroom handles by using paper towels. Georgia-Pacific two years ago started selling Safe-T-Gard, a tissue dispenser that's installed next to the door. It is designed "to enhance the hygienic perception of the washroom and promote cleanliness."

But paper towels pose their own problem: They often end up as litter. Some offices and restaurants put trash cans near the bathroom door, on one side or the other, but customers often miss the target. Linda Buckley, an office-services manager in Omaha, Neb., says until her company installed the Sanitary Door Opener, her two custodians frequently complained about having to pick wadded-up towels off the floor.

Stonewood Grill & Tavern has outfitted its 18 restaurants with Sanidoor, an automatic door made by a Florida company. Costing \$1,000 installed, the sensor-controlled doors open with the wave of a hand.

At \$124, the SanitGrasp forearm-powered handle invented by Mr. Fulkerson, is cheaper. He says he has sold about 300 over the past two years, to some office buildings and fast-food chains including four Chic-fil-A chicken restaurants in Arkansas, South Carolina and Georgia. But some customers don't understand exactly how to use the handle. At a recent morning at an IHOP in Orlando, Robert Gemelli, a car mechanic from New Orleans, used his hand and a paper towel. At the Alhambra True Light Presbyterian Church in Alhambra, Calif., a parishioner waved her hand in front of the door, expecting it to open. Shirley Yee, a member of the church's board of trustees, gave her a quick tutorial.

Rather than eliminate hand/handle contact, some devices aim to clean up the bathroom-door handle. At Dick's Diner in Murrysville, Pa., the bathrooms have been outfitted with Sanihandles, a door handle connected to a pair of ultraviolet lamps that kill germs. (A label on the device warns, "Do not stare into the blue light.")

'Hygienic Solutions' Simon Sassoon, the nephew of hair-care magnate Vidal Sassoon, has invented HYSO -- short for "Hygienic Solutions" -- a canister installed above the door handle that sprays it with disinfectant every few minutes. The company says the solution dries instantly so the handles don't stay wet. Mr. Sassoon, who was a musician and jewelry designer before devoting full time to his invention, says he realized the need for such a device one evening about three years ago when his dinner companion returned from the restroom with a paper towel in her hand.

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