

## Cough Etiquette

Did you know when you cough the particles come out just under the speed of sound? The speed of cough droplets has been measured. They can be very small and each drop can carry millions of viral and bacterial particles. There used to be signs up in the old days warning people not to spit on the gutter lest tuberculosis be spread. In France the sign read "Défense de Cracher" (NO SPITTING) but younger generations may not have seen this. Cowboys in the Wild West used to spit their chewing-tobacco spittle and no doubt tuberculous sputum into spittoons in the saloon and occasionally a mischievous one would throw a silver dollar into it for the desperate.

Viruses such as influenza are also caught by touching things like seats and hand rails and for this reason the wards in hospitals have hand wash for those who enter. The alcoholic gel used is very effective and can be carried in a woman's handbag along with the kitchen sink, cheque book, car keys and a range of shifting spanners.

In Japan, people have very sensibly worn face masks to prevent the spread of respiratory infections. Now that swine flu is heading our way, and we are entering winter, when you have a cold or flu, wear a mask if you go out and particularly when you sit in a doctor's waiting room. Think of the medical staff and the doctor too. Don't go out if you don't have too when you are sick and contagious. You may be not too sick, but think of those people with lung and other diseases and pregnant women who may succumb from a nasty viral infection. Use tissues when you cough and dispose of them properly. Don't use the same handkerchief repeatedly. If you are sick and do need to see the doctor, sit in your car until called, if you have a mobile phone.

The longer you sit in the waiting room, the more people you may infect. The problem is that we don't always know when we are carrying a nasty virus when we have a mild dose that might kill someone else. Wash your hands regularly, don't have grandchildren over and cover your mouth when you cough.

The young adult may die of the flu more than older people because they muster a more robust immune response which in turn can ironically damage the lung more by the profusion of immune cells that go to fight in the affected organs.

When I was a first year medical student, I worked on the holidays as an orderly at the then Chermiside Chest Hospital. One of my more unpleasant jobs was the clean out of the stainless steel sputum mugs of tuberculous patients and those with lung abscesses with Bon Ami. They didn't use paper or plastic liners in those days. After I had cleaned them out I'd put them in a steriliser for reuse. This was my baptism of fire in thoracic medicine. I will never forget the smell and the sight of the sputum.

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