Avoiding Germs With Lupus

by BARBARA LEECH

Tips for Avoiding Germs With Lupus

I admit it. If you are sick with anything from a cold, stomach virus, flu or strep, I do not wish to see you in person. Phone it in, Skype it, text message; know that whatever conversation, visit or love you feel a need to share with me and my family, I would rather wait a while to see you if you have been sick in the last five days.

I am not being mean or cold-hearted. In fact, I pose the idea that perhaps it is those who come bearing germs that will knock me out of commission and perhaps into the ER, who are behaving without consideration or kindness.

It is a difficult topic. I still struggle to find the best way to ask for love and respect from family and friends who seem to forget that I live with a compromised immune system and the weight of what that truly means to my life.

This year has been lucky so far with only a couple of stomach viruses and a cold, all of which did not come from daily life, grocery store carts or even from my kids from school, but instead came from contact with a friend or loved one who thought that getting together was of greater importance than my health or simply did not think about it at all.

With lupus in a flare, my overactive immune system is attacking me on the inside instead of those energetic germs people bring to me.

Last year, I had strep three times and was sick for four months straight on top of lupus, battling bacteria that even antibiotics could not keep at bay. My doctor said that with my immune system in that state, I would catch anything, even if it was just being in the same room as someone who was sick and happened to cough.

What would not affect others around me would find me easy prey with my defenseless systems. But how do you get the people in your life to “get it” and look out for you?

My Struggling Strategy

1. **Explain, explain, and then explain again.** Not that we should have to say it more than a couple of times, but honestly people forget most of what does not affect them personally.
2. **Get the emotional strength to tell people the truth about protecting yourself.** Learn to say (though it is hard to do with loved ones) that you know they are on the mend, (because they all say that) but you would rather wait at least five to six days after their complete recovery before you see them in person.
3. **If nobody else will protect you, protect yourself.** Don’t attend a party if you know someone in attendance has been ill.
4. **Develop a thick skin.** And I don’t mean a lupus rash. We need to be prepared that even those who love us may not like being told to stay away until they are completely well.
5. **If you find yourself unexpectedly around others who may be contagious, be cautious about eating from the buffet of food and wash your hands after touching surfaces such as door knobs.** Try to

keep personal space between you and others and if you are really concerned, excuse yourself early.

Taking Protection Into Your Own Hands

If you saw me, overly concerned about germs and religiously cleaning certain parts of my house to limit the threat of illness, you might think I am a germaphobe. Because of lupus, I have to be.

Having my kids at school greatly increases the threat of dangerous germs coming into my life. In the past, I have felt pretty defenseless against the inevitable onslaught against my immune system. I decided last school year I had to devise some method of protection, even if it was a small one.

Next page: why we need to protect ourselves against germs.

Why Take Action Against Germs?

For many with lupus, getting sick from something as small as a head cold can often trigger a large lupus flare on top of everything else.

Colds and flu can settle into your lungs faster than you can say pneumonia; add on top of that an attack of swelling and pain and that infection can take on a life of its own. It can send someone with lupus to the hospital and, since our bodies are too busy fighting itself rather than the infection, it can actually be deadly.

To put it bluntly, anyone's small cold can actually threaten our lives and cause illness and grief for more than a month.

Some people do not seem to get this fact about having lupus or retain it — or they simply do not care. I have had many occasions where someone comes to my home, or I am invited to theirs, and I eventually learn they or their children have been horribly ill but started feeling better that morning.

It makes me want to scream, leave and sometimes curse. It shows complete disregard for my health and my life.

But with school germs, what can a parent with lupus do? We really have no control over the fact that other parents send their kids to school sick and often kids don't even show signs of being ill until they are at school and are suddenly feeling awful.

So, I put a plan of action into place last school year and I was amazed that it seemed to cut back greatly on how often I got sick. It may not be the cure-all for the threat of these back-to-school germs, but it made enough of a difference that I am sticking with it this school year and hoping for the same results.

Where Do Germs Hide?

There are places in your home you may not think to clean and disinfect on a regular basis, and these places are often a hiding place of germs and bacteria that can get you sick. Here are a few things I target to cut back on the threat of germs:

Clothing the Kids Wore to School

When they come through the door after school, I have my kids change to after-school clothes and throw their clothing into the dirty laundry.

This removes whatever germs they have picked up while sitting in the lunchroom, the classroom carpet at story time, and those sneezes that landed on them when their best friend forgot to cover their face. I also have them wash their hands after they have changed, which also makes sense to do before their after school snack.

Doorknobs

Your door knobs, cabinet pulls, knobs on the stove and thermostat buttons are prime locations for germs and bacteria. Your family touches these knobs all the time and usually with unclean hands. You should wipe these surfaces clean with disinfecting cloths at least once per week.

Next page: more alarming places where germs hide and how to eliminate them.

Where Do Germs Hide?

The Kitchen Sink

All of the dishes the family eats off of make their way through here. Pieces of food left in your sink are the primary reason this area is a breeding ground for bacterial like E. coli and salmonella. You should ideally clean your sink with a bleach-and-water solution and hot water at least once per day.

Remote Controls

These devices are in everyone's hands, especially when someone is feeling under-the-weather. Remotes are also in hand when you are simply having a snack while watching TV, so food residue is also present from sticky or greasy fingers. Remotes are breeding grounds for germs and bacteria, so wipe them down with a disinfectant wipe several times per week.

Shoes

The bottoms of your family's shoes are crawling with germs and bacteria. Think about where they have been (public bathrooms, walking around the entire school where cold and flu germs are alive and well on carpets and tile). In some cultures, it is common to remove shoes before entering the home, but if that is too extreme for your family to remember, at least start a habit of removing them once you enter the home.

Counter Tops

Your countertops are a prime location for germs and bacteria. Your kids' lunch boxes, books and homework can bring the latest germs into your home and leave them on whatever surface they touch. Food you prepare can also leave behind bacteria, so they should be washed with hot, soapy water after you use them for anything, and wiped down with a disinfectant wipe at least once per day.

Your Car's Steering Wheel, Control Knobs and Your Keys

Whether you simply dropped off your son's backpack that he forgot, or you are volunteering in the classroom, you carry germs on your hands as you head back to your car. If there is hand sanitizer available, use it, but also keep anti-bacterial wipes in your car to clean your keys that you just handled, the steering wheel, the radio control buttons, door handle and gear shift.

This may seem excessive, but if you can eliminate the bulk of the germs that attach themselves and come into contact with you and your family, you can actually cut back on illness. Once kids are back to school, it seems germs are everywhere and more aggressive.

By simply keeping some of the germiest spots in your house (and car) cleaner, you could be looking at a healthier school year for your entire family, even for those with lupus.