

Making germs a no-go

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

Donna Chevannes' moment of truth came a couple of years ago on a flight to Florida when a seatmate told her about a friend who had gotten head lice from an aircraft headrest.



Head to toe: Germophobic travelers can purchase a wide range of protective products, but handwashing remains the most effective defense.

By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

The story bears just a whiff of urban legend, but it was enough for Chevannes to change her airborne ways. These days, the Edgewater, N.J., legal assistant totes an arsenal on board to ward off wayward bugs. Tucked in her carry-on are a pillow and blanket, a bottle of hand sanitizer, and, for good measure, a can of Lysol, which she uses to spray down the seat, armrests and tray table.

"I have OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) when I fly," she unapologetically declares.

Fortunately for Chevannes and those in similar situations, products aimed at the peripatetic germophobe seem to be multiplying as fast as bacteria in a petri dish.

Among the offerings: seat covers, face masks, disposable booties, personal air purifiers and more extreme devices, such as a \$128 portable bidet (in pink or blue).

But medical experts say many of these products are more effective in quelling the psychological ick factor than in preventing disease. In fact, the best protection against illness is also the simplest and least costly: frequent hand washing.

"Listen to Mom. Wash your hands. Wipe your nose," says Brian Terry, a physician at the Healthy Traveler Clinic in Pasadena, Calif.

Still, heavy load factors — more than 78% of seats on major U.S. carriers' domestic flights were filled in 2005, according to the Air Transport Association — mean more people crammed in close proximity, trading germs. And with cutbacks in airline services, blankets and pillows (where they're still provided) may be cleaned less frequently. Add to that growing fears about the spread of avian flu and recent reports of increased bedbug infestations in hotels and it's enough to make the germ-wary consider swaddling themselves in shrink-wrap.

Few travelers would go that far — yet — but Magellan's, a mail-order travel-products company, has increased its inventory of health-related products 12% in the past year and has seen sales increase by 28% on those items.

Frequent traveler John DiScala, founder of johnnyjet.com, also has noted a growth market of late in gadgets for the phobic. Some are intriguing, he says, "but most of them would make me either look like a freak or feel like a terrorist."

Case in point: a filter that attaches over the above-seat air-flow nozzle in an aircraft, he says. "You start sticking stuff on air nozzles and people are bound to wonder what you're up to."

Lance Paris, head of Aero-San Corp., has no such qualms about in-flight conspicuousness. Returning home from Chicago after a long day, the former risk manager and frequent business traveler leaned back in his airline seat and "buried my head in somebody's hair gel." He spent the three-hour flight dreaming up ways to prevent a repeat of the indignity and now runs a company that sells polypropylene seat and headrest covers for airlines under the Traveller's Edge brand.

The covers may bring peace of mind, but they won't stave off illness, Terry says. In fact, other than hand sanitizers — useful when soap and water aren't available — and a respiratory mask sturdy enough to block germs, most of these widely marketed products do little to prevent disease transmission.

"A lot of this stuff is hocus-pocus. There's not a lot of science behind it," Terry says. "But if you're a germophobe, nothing I'm going to say is going to matter, anyway."

That noted, here's a look at gear for the germ-phobic.

Hand sanitizing gels

Example: Hand Clens (\$5.85 an ounce).

The pitch: Kills disease-causing germs in seconds.

Expert opinion: Effective when you don't have access to water, though the cleansers won't remove dirt. They're also good as follow-up protection when the hand-washing water source is suspect, says Christie Reed, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention travel-health specialist.

To buy: 800-962-4943; magellans.com

Personal air purifiers

Example: Neo (\$19.95).

The pitch: Electrostatically charges aerosol particles and repels them.

Expert opinion: There is debate surrounding the effectiveness of air purifiers. In Terry's opinion, they're "a pacifier for adults. Air is swooshing around you in an aircraft. It's like saying you're going to purify water with an eyedropper when the river is washing over you." But a University of Cincinnati study, partially funded by an air purifier manufacturer, found that the effectiveness of the devices has more to do with their emitting a high enough concentration of unipolar ions than with their physical size. Some models, says Sergey Grinshpun, the environmental health professor who conducted the study, "can significantly decrease particle concentrations. And the smaller the space, the more significant the decrease."

To buy: 800-720-5076; ProTravelGear.com

Filters for above-seat air nozzles



By Travel Health Products

Example: Plane Clean Air Filter (\$19.95).

The pitch: Removes 99.5% of viruses, bacteria and contaminants from the air.

Expert opinion: Aircraft air is already filtered, so in essence, "it's filtering filtered air that's moving through clean ductwork," says Terry. Inventor Neal Avery maintains that air can become contaminated as it travels through ductwork — as it does in an airliner — and needs to be re-filtered at the point where it enters the cabin.

To buy: 909-348-9090; plane-clean-air.com

Personal pillows/blankets

Example: Planecomfort All-in-One Travel Comfort Kit (with attachable carrying case; \$29.99) and the RestEasy set (also includes headphones and headrest cover; \$9.95).

The pitch: For passengers worried about the cleanliness and availability of airline blankets and pillows.

Expert opinion: Disease-causing germs are transmitted through mucous membranes (eyes, nose, mouth). "Normally, people aren't putting blankets in their mouths," Reed says. But Terry believes toting your own pillow cover is a "reasonable idea."

To buy: Planecomfort, 603-293-7027; plane-comfort.net; RestEasy, 800-720-5076; ProTravelGear.com

Portable toothbrush sanitizer



By Leslie Smith, Jr., USA
TODAY

Example: VIOlight Travel Ultraviolet Toothbrush Sanitizer (\$29.95).

The pitch: Germicidal ultraviolet bulb keeps toothbrushes germ-free.

Expert opinion: The CDC says it's unnecessary to disinfect toothbrushes by this means. Terry suggests soaking the toothbrush in a mild bleach solution after a trip.

To buy: See various online and retail outlets

Face masks

Example: Traveller's Edge (four for \$4.99).

The pitch: Controls the spread of infection.

Expert opinion: Paper surgical-style masks help contain the spread of germs if the wearer coughs or sneezes. But they won't necessarily keep the wearer from being infected by other

people. A mask respirator with a rating of at least N95 does offer this protection but must fit properly to be effective, says Reed.

To buy: 818-654-9448; aero-san.com

Sleep sacks



By Leslie Smith, Jr., USA
TODAY

Example: DreamSack (\$62).

The pitch: Keeps bedbugs and other cooties at bay.

Expert opinion: A good idea if bedding is suspect. But remember to pack it in plastic and launder it upon your return, says Reed.

To buy: 800-670-7661; dreamsack.com

Paper slippers

Example: Magellan's PlaneWrap Feetwrap (\$9.85 for 10 pairs).

The pitch: Keeps dirt, germs and fungi off your feet when going through airport security.

Expert opinion: It's unlikely you'll pick up a foot disease from an airport floor, but from a general hygiene perspective, they're not a bad idea, the experts agree. Some airports, including Dallas-Fort Worth and Phoenix Sky Harbor, distribute them free at security checkpoints.

To buy: 800-962-4943; magellans.com

Airline seat covers



By Leslie Smith, Jr., USA
TODAY

Example: Traveller's Edge (\$7.99) and PlaneSheets (in first- and coach-class sizes; two for \$12.99).

The pitch: Prevents passengers from coming in contact with germs while flying.

Expert opinion: They might protect you from a previous passenger's gunk, but they're unnecessary for fighting disease. "You're wearing clothes," says Terry. "We're not flying naked. Yet."

To buy: Traveller's Edge, 818-654-9448; aero-san.com; PlaneSheets, 818-404-3136; planesheets.com