

## The Unsung Spreader: Touch and Coronavirus

If there is one thing people will forever associate with Corona it will be masks, social distancing, stay home, etc. The ubiquitous, oft repeated refrain that “wearing a mask and social distancing prevent the spread of COVID-19” was pounded into the world’s head in the same way a parent reminds a child to say “thank you” or “you’re welcome” when interacting with strangers. All of this was done to stop the spread of COVID especially in the wake of mounting hospitalizations and positivity rates. However, there is another, less emphasized, way that Corona spread: touch between things covered with COVID germs and things that were not. In many ways, this very well could have been the silent spreader contributing to the rising COVID numbers and deaths.

To explain what I mean, I need to do some background, so you’ll understand where I’m coming from and what authority I have to speak on this topic. When I was an infant in the 1990s, I was always sick with various illnesses. Distressed by this, my mother asked my pediatrician what she could do to prevent me from getting sick. He responded that it was imperative for her to wash her hands and mine after leaving a store before we got into the car. It was also vital to wash our hands when we came home. This would keep any germs from the outside world from getting on me or in my home where they could end up in my mouth, eyes, ears, etc. when my parents were taking care of me or if I put my hands in my mouth. This, the doctor said, would help prevent me from getting sick. My mother followed his instructions, and I became sick less often. My parents continued to follow the doctor’s advice during my childhood and after my sister’s birth. We used “Wet Ones™” before it was cool, and we are no stranger to odd looks from people who don’t understand why we wash our hands before eating or after we touch something that’s germ ridden (think going to the restroom, touching dogs, and after shopping). We tried to proselytize my grandparents to our clean routine but they both did not understand it and did not follow it consistently. When the Corona sanitizing protocols were established, we were already pros at cleaning hands and surfaces, and we thought it was great! People were actually starting to be clean like us and we thought the world might become a cleaner place. However, we began to notice people were not being as germ-free as they thought.

One day in April, I went paper towel hunting at HEB (a Texas grocery store) for my mother. As part of our clean routine, we always clean cart handles before we touch them. However, because everyone was being so clean now, I thought I could skip bringing a Wet Ones wipe with me because HEB was diligently sanitizing their carts before giving them to customers. But, when I was given a “clean” cart I noticed, to my horror, that the cart handle had not been well cleaned. HEB used a garden sprayer to spray sanitizer on the cart handles; however, when they did that, the cleaning solution only came out as drops which landed in random places on the handle. This means that only those spots where the cleaner was were clean which left most of the handle still germy and potentially Corona infected. I took the cart inside and wiped it with HEB’s sanitizing wipes making sure to cover the whole surface of the cart. I could not believe HEB, on the forefront of safe shopping in Texas, could make such a basic cleaning mistake. I told my mother about it and she was not surprised. My mother witnessed similar unclean habits in a local restaurant called Torchy’s Tocos in the summer. She told me that she saw two women sitting at

the bar talking without their masks on (it was legal in TX to take your mask off when sitting at a table in a restaurant). While she was not concerned about that, she was horrified that one of the women had her mask hanging from her arm and was wiping it across the bar table as she moved and talked. Considering our experience with HEB and my mother's witnessing waiters and waitresses touch door handles, money, and food with the same gloves, she did not have much confidence in the cleanliness of the surfaces in the restaurant and pointed out that it was germy for the woman to put something on her face that she had put on the table. This had the potential to make the woman sick because she was not being careful about the surfaces she placed the mask on and was later going to put it on her face. Almost a year after Corona became a thing, people still don't have a basic understanding of the danger of germ spread through touch. On February 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, my father and sister went to Culver's, one of our favorite restaurants, and saw a young employee, dutifully wearing a mask, about to make food without washing her hands. Her manager promptly corrected her and made her wash her hands, but it was a testament to the fact that touch is an overlooked means of spreading Corona. The young woman could have touched something with a new COVID variant and could have passed on that variant to others if she had not washed her hands. How many other times to similar situations occur everyday?

Finally, another flagrant touching transgression is something that is stressed: avoiding touching your face. I have a job that requires lots of video conferences and online meetings, and I cannot count all the times I have seen people touch their noses, mouth, and eyes. Colleagues at work, professors, tutors have all done it in my presence. I recently saw a tutor on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021 who touched his face so much that if he had had soap on his hands, he would have been washing his face! This touching while it may seem innocent, still has the possibility to spread COVID if the person's hands have not been properly cleaned. Even if the person's hands were clean, if they were positive for COVID, with or without symptoms, they would be getting the COVID virus on their hand, shirt sleeve etc. and could spread it to other surfaces where healthy people may touch it. In this case, a mask would not be preventing this kind of spread. The fact that people often touch their faces while wearing their masks (and I have regretted doing this to) can also spread the virus through touch.

As I have probably emphasized enough, touch is a vial way that Corona spreads, but it gets much less attention than masks and staying away from people. If people had been, and were today, more careful about what they touch and washing surfaces and their hands properly, I think Corona numbers and deaths would be lower and people would not be so afraid.