

# Fecal Latest ‘Flavor’ in Starbucks, Caffe Nero and Costa Coffee



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — June 28, 2017



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Okay, most people don't want the words *feces* and *food* uttered in the same sentence. So, with [just-released reports from a BBC investigation](#) [2] revealing that ice from three of the largest coffee companies in the United Kingdom was contaminated with fecal matter (aka stool), expect a little panic to ensue.

[BBC's Watchdog group](#) [3] identified a diversity of bacteria concentrations in iced beverages from Starbucks, Costa Coffee and Caffe Nero. Tables, trays and high chairs were also sampled at 30 branches. The story further claims the companies are initiating their own investigations and updating ice-handling guidelines.

Besides the aforementioned, not much is revealed about the subject. How worrisome are the findings? How much was recovered in terms of colony counts of these bacteria? What were the locations— the ice, the ice containers? What were the range of bacterial species discovered? Are these strains known to cause disease? Why were only coffee houses tested? How many samples and of what were collected? With little revealed in the reporting, appreciating the scope and level of worry is a challenge.

In a perfect world, we would like ZERO fecal material in our edibles. In reality, it presides in many places we encounter each day—money, elevator buttons, the subway, door handles, medical charts and so forth. This is why infection control protocols are routinely tweaked and newly implemented to avoid hospital-acquired infections since in those environments the patients are even more vulnerable.

The mystery here with the coffee houses in terms of how alarmed we need to be is very unclear. A

bit of detective work between optimal sampling, understanding work flow and habits, equipment placement and the environment will quickly elucidate how best to remedy the problem. Thorough cleaning and immediately underscoring the importance of hand washing—each and every time with bathroom use, or using gloves with payment exchange etc— can rapidly correct the issue.

Hand washing, hand washing, hand washing is essential to reducing the spread of infections. The friction created is critical to minimizing the problem. But, bacteria and contaminants, in general, for the same and different reasons abound in our daily life.

It is not enough to just wash our hands effectively. It is equally important to have a working knowledge of fomites —objects or materials that carry a risk of transmitting infections from sinks to countertops to stethoscopes. What good is washing our hands if prior to our next intended task we re-infect or re-contaminate ourselves?

There are literally courses doctors and medical professionals must take to be appropriately credentialed on proper hand washing, avoiding fecal-oral contamination and infectious disease prevention—in our alternative universe the consequence of poor practice can contribute to life and death events. There is certainly no downside to expanding this education to the general public, but assuming the employees at these coffee house facilities are the only individuals requiring such measures is a false notion. Who knows— depending on the lay out, how money is exchanged and so on, the customers might play a role?! Targeted training also has utility for establishments in this and other food preparatory spaces.

Bottom line, let's await further revelations before freaking out, but in the mean time be cognizant in general of touching surfaces and objects then your own mouth and face without washing your hands. Hot drinks when above specific temperatures will carry a lower likelihood of transmitting unwanted bugs. In a doctor's office or care setting, we often wash our hands in front of patients to maintain effective infection control while simultaneously assuaging fears.

In general, be aware of your surroundings and interactions. If you witness a breach or are concerned an unsafe behavior occurred, then there are many avenues to take action like speaking to a manager. Often times people—employees or otherwise— are unaware of their action and the fix can be quite simple.

The take home here is thorough investigations are underway and updating cleanliness and hygiene protocols is never a bad thing. Live your life, but stay alert and make adjustments where reasonable that aren't so restrictive that you stop enjoying living. If you are immunocompromised or in a more vulnerable population, then using more strict standards might be in your best interest and your doctor can best guide you in that realm.

When in doubt, wash your hands and request someone wash theirs should you be uncomfortable. If done with respect and kindness—in a cafe or a medical facility, then you will be amazed how others respond and the mention alone can jolt a person out of their momentary or sustained complacency.

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