

Yuck: Few people correctly cover coughs, sneezes

By MIKE STOBBE

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ATLANTA – Alas, here's more proof that most people have habits that aren't very sanitary – and sometimes can be plain disgusting.

For a study, medical students secretly watched hundreds of people cough or sneeze at a train station, a shopping mall and a hospital in New Zealand. What they saw wasn't pretty, with most people failing to properly prevent an airborne explosion of infectious germs.



The work was done in the capital city of Wellington over two weeks last August, at the tail end of a worrisome but fairly mild wave of swine flu illnesses. It was a time when the pandemic was international news, and public health campaigns were telling children and adults to be careful about spreading the virus.

The good news is that about three of every four people tried to cover their cough or sneeze, in at least a token attempt to prevent germs from flying through the air.

The bad news is that most people – about two of three – used their hands to do it.

"When you cough into your hands, you cover your hand in virus," said study author Nick Wilson, an associate professor of public health at the Otago University campus in Wellington.

"Then you touch doorknobs, furniture and other things. And other people touch those and get viruses that way," he explained.

Health officials recommend that people sneeze into their elbow, in a move sometimes called 'the Dracula' for its resemblance to a vampire suddenly drawing up his cape. But only about 1 in 77 did that.

Using a tissue or handkerchief is another preferred option, but only about 1 in 30 did that.

More bad news: The researchers didn't report numbers on this, but several times they saw people spit on the floor, including at the hospital.

"They were a bit grossed out," Wilson said, describing the reaction of his team, which logged 384 sneezes and coughs.

Wilson called the findings surprising, especially given that it occurred only four months after the virus was first identified, when it was still considered unusually dangerous.

The study was presented Monday at an infectious diseases conference in Atlanta.

Coughing into hands might be fine if everyone promptly and thoroughly disinfected their hands afterward, but no one believes that's happening.

A 2007 study by Harris Interactive done in public restrooms suggested that about one in four people don't even wash their hands after going to the bathroom. It found that men were the worst, with one out of three failing to wash up.