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Hidden dangers on shopping trolleys

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TAKING a trip to the supermarket can be dangerous, as research has shown that the handles of the shopping trolleys are a hotbed for bacteria and viruses which can make shoppers sick, especially children.

In some countries, some grocery chains provide anti-bacterial wipes for customers to clean the handles before use but this practice does not seem to have caught on in Malaysia despite the trolleys being an essential part of a shopping trip.

A study in South Korea by the Korean Consumer Protection Board found that the handles of shopping trolleys are the most polluted objects frequently touched by people, with more bacteria found there than on public toilet door handles.



Dirty: Shopping trolleys left near garbage bins would then make its way to the common trolley bays for use by an unsuspecting shopper

Studies have also shown that each shopping trolley handle has more than one million germs, which can be ingested by toddlers who touch the handles before touching their mouths.

Researchers stressed that trolley handles are one of the most contaminated public surfaces, even dirtier than most public restrooms.

According to them, the restrooms are regularly cleaned and disinfected while the shopping trolleys are rarely sanitised. Most stores were found to clean their trolleys only several times a year. Swabs taken from the handles have shown the presence of germs, viruses, bacteria and bodily fluids.

A microbiologist at the University of Arizona Environmental Reserach Laboratory, Dr Kelly Reynolds, who is doing research to determine why certain bacteria find their way into

people's homes made a startling discovery: one in five shopping trolleys tested positive for bodily fluids - blood, saliva or urine - that could transmit germs.



Not safe: A shopping trolley is also used to hold children.

His studies showed that shopping trolley handles are among the leading sources of germs and bacteria in public, the handles harbouring staphylococcus aureus, Streptococcus pneumoniae, E coli and even Hepatitis B. Bacteria from meat and poultry are other concerns.

A shopper also noted that store employees sometimes used the trolleys to transport trash and as such, the whole trolley should be sanitised regularly.

“It makes sense for the stores to sanitise the trolleys and not just leave it to the customers to wipe the handles before use,” the shopper said.

“It is common sense that something used to carry food should be clean. It would also be nice if the store employees were told to wash their hands before handling groceries,” the shopper added.

Here in Malaysia, there is no specific research carried out on the cleanliness aspect of supermarket trolleys.



Exposed to danger: Children are left sitting in a trolley while the parents unload their shopping items into the boot of their car.

A specialist in Internal Medicine at a hospital in Seremban, Dr Mohd Arifin Mohd Ali, said as far as medical research is concerned, no work was done in this area.

However, he added that during the outbreak of the Influenza A (H1N1), the hospital launched a large-scale public awareness programme to educate the public on ways to contain the spread of the pandemic and other infectious diseases through use of public amenities.

“We advised on effective measures through public education. One effective way to control the spread of infectious diseases is by maintaining personal hygiene,” said Dr Mohd Arifin.

He said there were a number of researches done overseas in this area as the public was concerned with the spread of infectious diseases via transmission from one person to another through unhygienic shopping trolleys.

“In foreign countries, cleanliness of shopping trolleys are taken seriously but locally it falls under general cleanliness, similar to guidelines issued for public toilets,” said Dr Mohd Arifin.



For reuse: A hypermarket employee pushing trolleys to the trolley bay.

Carrefour Malaysia and Singapore marketing and communications director Low Ngai Yuen said the company had strict cleanliness guidelines.

“Our trolleys are cleaned before being returned to the entrance after every use.

“Before opening, at midday and before peak hours, the trolleys are given a cleaning again and the handlebars are wiped down with disinfectant,” she said.

According to her, employees were also prohibited from using the trolleys for any other purpose, as there were specific trolleys for taking out the trash, usually without advertisement panelling.

Meanwhile, Giant Malaysia corporate communication manager (marketing department) Zamri Maulan said the chain provided shopping trolleys to customers at no charge and appointed cleaners to clean the trolleys daily.

“Trolley-cleaning is one of the specific areas under our contract with the cleaning contractor. Our store managers will inspect and ensure our shopping trolleys are cleaned and sanitised every day,” Zamri said.

Aeon Co (M) Berhad corporate communications (corporate/public relations) CSR and corporate branding division manager Zakimarhaini Mohd Said said trolley pushers employed by Jusco were reminded to clean the trolleys thoroughly weekly.

“Trolleys that have stains or are dirty will usually be isolated from the trolley bays. They are thoroughly cleaned before being returned to the bay,” Zakimarhaini said.

She said the company had guidelines for all its outlets and safety and cleanliness of shopping tools were among the priorities.