Q: Are tissues more hygienic than hankies when you have a cold?

A: Probably, providing you throw them away after use.

Our expert: Professor Jack Gwaltney and Professor Ron Eccles

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Are you a tissue or a handkerchief person? Conditions of Use

Are you a tissue or a handkerchief person? And does it really matter when it comes to stopping the spread of the viruses that cause colds?

Well, we're still waiting for a researcher to examine this thorny question, but our experts say it's likely tissues are the more hygienic option, providing we throw them away straight after we have used them and wash our hands.

There is, however, nothing magical about tissues in the hygiene stakes. If you don't throw them away, and maintain good hand hygiene, then they're no different from re-using the same handkerchief.

The secrets of nasal secretions

When you blow your nose into a tissue or handkerchief, the nasal secretions that end up in your receptacle of choice are teeming with the virus that is causing your cold – and they can survive for a decent period of time once they leave our body.

There are more than 200 viruses that can cause a cold, and many of these are members of the rhinovirus family.

"The rhinovirus is a tough virus," says Professor Jack Gwaltney, Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of Virginia Medical School in the USA.

"It has a protein coat and it survives reasonably well on hard surfaces and on fabrics. It can even survive in a dry dish. You can assume that the virus will survive in a hanky or tissue."

Gwaltney estimates the virus could live for up to three days outside the body.

However, Professor Ron Eccles, director of the Common Cold Research Centre, at Cardiff University, in the UK, thinks that viruses in hankies or tissues are more likely to survive for hours rather than days.

Regardless, you can assume that touching a used handkerchief or tissue will likely put virus particles on to your hands – from where you can spread the infection.
**Touchy subject**

If nasal secretions get onto our hands we can spread them by touching other people or contaminating things that other people will touch. These can include:

- other people’s hands
- door knobs
- toys
- telephones
- computer keyboards
- money

Once virus particles are on another person’s hand they can catch a cold if the virus is introduced to their nose. This can happen if they put their finger up their nose or even if they touch their eyes. Viruses in the eye can travel to the nose through the tear ducts.

We are more likely to pick up the virus this way, than from inhaling virus-bearing droplets sent into the air when someone with a cold coughs, Gwaltney and Eccles explain.

It’s also worth noting that nasal secretions contain much more of the virus than our saliva or secretions from our throat.

"The dangerous material is nasal secretions", Gwaltney says.

Of course, touching your own used tissue or hanky won’t affect you, as you already have the virus – but you will become more of an infection risk to others.

**Soap and water**

Luckily it's easy to remove cold viruses from our hands with good old soap and water and the experts say we should wash our hands after we blow our noses or touch a used tissue or hanky.

"Just washing under a tap will mechanically remove the virus", says Gwaltney. "Using soap is even better".

And if you would rather use hankies than disposable tissues, just make sure you wash them – and your hands – regularly.

Gwaltney says that putting hankies in with the normal wash will remove the virus – there's no need to wash at a high temperature.

And to avoid getting sick in the first place, Eccles recommends washing your hands after being in a public place and avoiding touching your nose and eyes.

If you can't wash your hands, you could consider using an alcohol-based hand-rub, which research suggests will kill bacteria and viruses. Although Gwaltney notes they are more effective at killing flu viruses than rhinoviruses.

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