

## Why turning to germaphobia won't protect us from another pandemic

As someone who has spent years doing research in health geography, I understand that this collective turn to cleanliness serves a purpose. We are, after all, in the midst of a pandemic. Anxiety about contamination is driving us to wash our hands more, which in turn is probably helping prevent the spread of Covid-19.

But what if this anxiety crystallizes into a long-term, habitual fear of germs? I believe that such a cultural shift wouldn't just be unhelpful, it would potentially be a danger to public health — and to the broader social sphere.

To understand why, it's helpful to remind ourselves that viruses can have beneficial effects. Some viruses, including many bacteriophages, possess life-saving medical powers. Others, including [herpesviruses](#), can lead to serious infections, but in their dormant state may also train the human immune system to fight Listeria food poisoning and bubonic plague.

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Moreover, the sanitizers and soaps we're using to immobilize the new coronavirus can also wipe out bacteria that are essential to human health. The human microbiome, the diverse collection of microbes living in and on the human body, has now been established as [hugely important](#) to digestive health, metabolic function, and immune responses.

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[T]he lesson of this pandemic is not that we, as individuals, must do a better job of avoiding germs. It's that we, as a society, must be better prepared for the next big public health threat.

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