Have you got a dirty qwerty?

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Computer keyboards can host more harmful bacteria than an average toilet seat, reveals Which? Computing.

The computing magazine turned the microscope on over 30 keyboards in a typical London office and found some had harmful bacteria that could put their users at high risk of becoming ill.*

In one case, a microbiologist recommended the removal of a keyboard as it had 150 times the pass limit of bacteria, and was five times filthier then a toilet seat that was swabbed. The germs found could cause food poisoning symptoms such as diarrhoea and other stomach upsets.

The main cause of a bug-infested keyboard is eating lunch at desks, as the food deposits encourage the growth of millions of bacteria. Poor personal hygiene, such as dodging the hand washing basin after going to the toilet, may also be to blame.

Despite the obvious health hazard of a dirty keyboard, how often people clean their computers varies widely, a Which? Computing survey shows.**

One in ten people (11 per cent) said they never cleaned their keyboard with a further 20 per cent admitting to never cleaning their mouse. Almost half (46 per cent) cleaned their keyboard less than once a month.

Sarah Kidner, Editor, Which? Computing says:

"Most people don't give much thought to the grime that builds up on their PC, but if you don't clean your computer, you might as well eat your lunch off the toilet. Why not give your PC a spring clean? It's quite simple to do and could prevent your computer from becoming a health hazard."

Which? Computing guide to a cleaner computer:

> Before you start cleaning, shut down the computer and unplug it.
> Gently wipe surfaces with a soft, lint-free cloth. Lightly dampen (not wet) the cloth with a small amount of water or an approved computer cleaning fluid.
> Unplug your keyboard, turn it upside down and shake out any loose dust and food crumbs inside. Disinfect the surface with alcohol wipes.
> There's an internet myth that you can wash your keyboard in a dishwasher. Don't.
> Use a vacuum cleaner with a rubber or brush nozzle on exterior surfaces and vents.
> Use compressed air in short bursts to blow dust and debris off computer components. Don't use a cloth to wipe down internal computer components.
> Headphones can be used by multiple people and can spread germs or even head lice. Wipe them with a damp cloth.

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Notes to Editor

For further information, a PDF of the full report, or an interview with Which? Computing, contact Martin Chapman on 020 7770 7373 or martin.chapman@which.co.uk

Please note the name change to Which? Computing. From now on all Which? magazines will follow the same naming convention - with Which? first.

*Which? asked a microbiologist to swab 33 keyboards, a toilet seat, and a toilet door handle at the Which? London office in January 2008. He was looking for bugs only found in unhygienic places and those that can cause food poisoning such as e.coli (predominantly from faecal origin) and staphylococcus aureas. Four keyboards were potential health hazards. One had far higher levels of germs than a toilet seat.

Microbiologist James Francis said: "These results are generally typical of offices up and down the country."

**Over 4,000 Which? online panel members were asked in January and February 2008 how often they clean PC components.