

# REGISTRATION

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# Germaphobes obsessed with cleanliness

Howard Hughes insisted visitors wash before entering his home

BY JOAN RANSBERRY  
Staff Writer

In the Monk TV series, gentle detective Adrian Monk works the grimy streets of San Francisco but is so driven by fear of germs that he must scrub himself after shaking hands with someone.

Mr. Monk is a germaphobe. He washes his hands a lot more than necessary. Germaphobe is the popular name for people who become so obsessed with germs and dirt they feel compelled to act out rituals of washing and cleaning.

In the show Seinfeld, David Puddy plays a "recovering germaphobe".

"Ten years," he says, pointing to a commemorative necklace.

Real people with this condition include the late Howard Hughes and Saddam Hussein. Both men ordered visitors to strip and wash with antibacterial soap before entering their homes.

True germaphobes have obsessive-compulsive disorder, which can take various forms. Some people with the disorder are checkers. They're obsessed with a fear of losing control of aggressive urges and their anxiety can be relieved only by checking something, such as if a burner on the stove has been turned off.

Hoarding, counting and praying are some other manifestations of the disease.

While there are multiple forms of the disorder, germaphobia is one of the most common. When assessing a patient, a clinician looks for specific signs, including the fact the obsession with contamination is gradually taking over the person's life and actions.

People afflicted with the illness engage in ritual cleaning or washing for at least one hour a day. Help includes involving other family members in the treatment. The person knows the obsession with germs is foolish but feels compelled to wash or clean over and over.

## What really scares you?

# Phobia Factor

A series

Toronto's Centre of Addiction and Mental Health offers help including education material on its web page.

The centre points out everyone has bothersome worries now and then. Worries that consume a person are called obsessions. Obsessions are unwanted or intrusive thoughts, urges or images that surface in the mind over and over again.

Many people have rituals or specific ways of doing things. For people with obsessive-compulsive disorder, however, rituals may become stuck and last hours. When taken to the extreme, rituals are called compulsives.

*While people should wash their hands a lot, we all have our lives to live.*

When someone in a family is ill, everyone is affected, not just the person with the illness. This is true if the illness is diabetes or obsessive-compulsive disorder, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health says.

Families often suffer for years before symptoms are finally diagnosed. While people with the condition often try to involve family members in compulsive rituals such as hand washing, family members are advised not to participate in the person's rituals.

To keep the peace, family members often play along or help out with behaviours such as hoarding, checking and washing. Or they may respond with disbelief or denial. Fearing prejudice, they can become isolated.

It's natural for families to feel resentful or disappointed when the condition interferes with normal family life. Acknowledging the illness can help family members feel less isolated and guilty.

Bill Mindell, director of infectious disease control for York Region Health Services, said that providing hand washing is done within reason, it's critical to good health.

"From a public health standpoint, there are germs out there," Mr. Mindell said. "While people should wash their hands a lot, we all have our lives to live. It's not rocket science. People should wash their hands when needed."

Mr. Mindell also pointed out good housekeeping practises are all part of the makeup for good health. People are reminded to keep hot food hot and cold food cold, to make sure food items are properly protected during storage, preparation, display and service, to keep food contact equipment in good repair, to clean and sanitize work surfaces and equipment frequently, to keep floors, walls and ceilings clean and to provide proper and adequate pest control.

Individual habits are the deciding factor when it comes to prevention of food-borne disease, Mr. Mindell stressed. "By developing good personal hygiene habits, you can avoid serious illness," Mr. Mindell said.

During last year's SARS scare, people visiting hospitals and nursing home were required to wash their hands. "Yes, with SARS, people in general were concerned," Mr. Mindell said. "SARS was an infection of hospitals and affected families of health care workers."

Today, the fear of SARS is not as prevalent. "The world is now SARS-free," he said. "People have to go about their lives. We can't go about wearing masks and gloves all the time. People should listen to the health care providers and not get carried away."

For more information on obsessive-compulsive disorder, log on to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's web page at [www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net)

## MARKHAM BOWLING CENTRE

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