

The Two Germiest Pet Items in Your Home

Your pet is less likely to be bothered by these germ-y things than you are. Unfortunately, the list of potential pathogens is long and risky. Because of the risk, it's critical to take these actions to safeguard your home.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent small study of 22 family homes revealed that pet bowls are the fourth most germ-infested item found in households with dogs and cats
- All pet food bowls, including those used for kibble, should be washed after each use, primarily to safeguard the health of human family members
- Food bowls should be washed with hot, soapy water, and water bowls should be wiped dry before refilling, and thoroughly washed every couple of days
- Stainless steel, porcelain or glass food and water bowls are a much better choice than plastic bowl
- Pet toys almost make the top 10 list of germiest household items, especially soft toys

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 03, 2019.

An interesting "germ study" conducted in 2011 by the NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) asked 22 families to swab 30 everyday household items and submit the swabs so they could be measured for levels of yeast, mold and coliform bacteria (a family of bacteria that includes salmonella and E. coli.)¹

While many people assume the most germ-infested spot in the home is the bathroom, the NSF study showed that most of the top 10 germiest items are found in the kitchen, with pet food bowls coming in at No. 4.

My guess is that in most cases of homes with grubby pet bowls, dogs and cats are fed kibble (which, needless to say, I never recommend). Those pet parents may not realize that while dry food doesn't leave the same obvious mess behind as canned and raw or fresh food, it's just as likely, and even more likely in some cases, to be contaminated with salmonella, E. coli or other types of bacteria.

So while the bowl may look clean after your pet eats his dry food, to safeguard the health of human family members, it's just as important to wash kibble bowls, as it is to wash bowls used for moist diets.

It's also important to recognize that healthy dogs and cats have a much higher tolerance for bacteria in food than humans do. In fact, their digestive systems are specifically designed to deal with considerable amounts of both familiar and foreign bacteria — the type of bacteria they would encounter when eating wild prey.

There are two reasons carnivorous pets can handle a heavy bacterial load: stomach acid and bile. Their stomachs are naturally so highly acidic there aren't many organisms that can survive it. Dogs and cats also produce a tremendous amount of bile, which is both anti-parasitic and anti-pathogenic. If the stomach acid doesn't kill a pathogen, chances

are the bile will.

How Often to Wash Your Pet's Food and Water Bowls

The experts recommend washing food bowls after every meal, regardless of what type of diet you offer your pet. Food bowls should be washed with hot, soapy water after each meal, and water bowls should be wiped dry before refilling, and thoroughly washed every couple of days or more often as necessary.

Not only does leftover food attract its own bacteria, but the microbes that normally live in your dog's or cat's mouth and saliva can be transferred to leftover food and moisture in the bowl, creating an ideal environment for growth. The list of potential food bowl pathogens is a long one. According to Dr. William Burkholder from the Center for Veterinary Medicine at the FDA:

*"What kind of bacteria grow in the bowls depends on factors like the environment, exposure and oral hygiene of the animal, but possible examples include Staphylococcus aureus, Pasteurella multocida and different species of Corynebacterium, Streptococcus, Enterobacteria, Neisseria, Moraxella, Bacillus and, less frequently, Salmonella and Pseudomonas."*²

Some of these bacteria pose a potential danger to family members, especially to the very young, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems. That's why it's so important to wash your hands with soap and water after handling your pet's food, and also pet food bowls.

Is Bleach Good for Cleaning Pet Bowls?

The NSF suggests that if you hand-wash your pet's bowls, you should also place them in a solution of half a teaspoon of household bleach in 1 gallon of water and let them soak for about 10 minutes once per week.

I disagree. Bleach is a caustic and potentially toxic chemical agent that isn't necessary as long as you carefully wash your pet's bowls after each meal with hot, soapy water, rinse them thoroughly and allow them to air dry. As you're rinsing, run your hand around the bowl, inside and out, checking for any little food chunks you might've missed, and ensuring there's no slimy feel to the bowl.

An alternative to hand-washing is to put the bowls in the dishwasher, but since most pets eat twice a day, you'll either need to run your dishwasher a lot, or you'll need a large supply of extra bowls. In my opinion, there's no need to wash your pet's bowls or serving utensils separately from human dishes, but many people do.

The Type of Pet Food and Water Bowls You Use Is Important

Plastic food and water bowls are probably the most popular with pet parents, but I'm not a fan. While plastic bowls are inexpensive and convenient, they're also impossible to thoroughly sanitize, and in addition, as the plastic begins to break down it can leach toxic chemicals into your pet's food and water.

Bacteria and oils can also get trapped in the peeling plastic, potentially causing skin irritation or worse. Some dogs and cats can develop allergies to the dyes and materials in plastic bowls, and they've also been linked to tear staining. In addition, aggressive chewers have been known to gnaw their bowls into small pieces and swallow them.

I recommend stainless steel, porcelain or glass food and water bowls for your pet, but even those options have some disclaimers. BPA-free plastic bowls can be used in a pinch when you're traveling with your furry family member or in other temporary situations, as long as you clean it thoroughly after each use and replace it at the first sign the plastic is degrading.

Buying 18-gauge stainless steel is important, and preferably through a company that has done third party purity testing; it's shocking, but even stainless steel has proven to be contaminated, as demonstrated by the **Petco metal bowl recall** several years ago.

Some porcelain can contain lead and others are not approved for food products, so make sure you buy good-quality porcelain made for food use from a company you trust. Pyrex or Duralex glass bowls are my favorite, as they're durable and nontoxic, unlike other cheaply made glass products that may contain lead or cadmium.

Coming in at No. 7 on the Top 10 Germiest List: Pet Toys

Also in the NSF's top 10 list of germiest household items are pet toys, which were found in the study to be a source of coliform bacteria (including staph bacteria), yeast and mold. As is the case with pet food bowls that don't appear dirty, often your pet's toys don't, either, which is why it's really important to remember to wash your hands after playing with your pet or moving her toys around.

Not long ago a television station in Grand Rapids, Michigan featured a segment on bacteria on dog toys.³ The station worked with a laboratory to measure the contamination on toys belonging to one of the news reporter's dogs, a Toy Poodle named Henry. They tested only soft toys, and the bacteria counts were so high they had to dilute the samples just to analyze them!

Chances are the massive amounts of bacteria on your own dog's toys won't bother him in the least, but there's a possibility a human family member could become ill after handling a dog toy if they don't wash their hands thoroughly before touching their face, putting food in their mouth, etc.

Hard (e.g., plastic) toys can be cleaned with hot soapy water, rinsed and allowed to air dry. Again, I don't recommend using bleach or any chemical cleaner or disinfectant — especially with something your dog will be licking and chewing and carrying around in his mouth. Soft toys can be thrown in the clothes washer with other laundry.

Washing your dog's toys regularly (once a month is a reasonable guideline) also gives you the opportunity to check their condition and toss the ones that are breaking down or falling apart.

Sources and References

[Reader's Digest](#)

¹ [NSF](#)

² [VetStreet, April 12, 2017](#)

³ [Fox17 West Michigan April 16, 2018](#)
