

Stop eating in your car, warns auto expert – Here are the hidden health risks

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As millions prepare for Christmas journeys to visit family and friends, motorway service stations will be packed with travellers grabbing quick meals and snacks. But for those choosing to eat these purchases in their cars rather than inside the services, there are hidden health risks they should know about.

Vehicle interiors can harbour surprisingly high levels of bacteria - and the festive travel season, with its longer journeys and rushed meal stops, makes this problem even more pressing. Research has found that several areas inside vehicles actually contain more contamination than the average toilet seat, a comparison that might make you reconsider that next drive-through meal.

“The combination of factors inside a vehicle creates an environment where bacteria can flourish,” explains Kazimieras Urbonas, Supplier Excellence Manager at Ovoko, one of Europe's largest online marketplaces for used car parts. “When drivers eat inside their cars without understanding these risks or taking proper precautions, they're potentially exposing themselves to health hazards they'd never tolerate at home.”

Below, Urbonas explains why car interiors pose hidden health risks and shares expert advice on making your vehicle safer for eating.

Why Cars Are a Perfect Breeding Ground for Bacteria

Unlike kitchens, which are designed with hygiene in mind, cars create the perfect storm for bacterial growth. The enclosed space traps warmth from the engine, sunlight, and body heat, maintaining temperatures that allow microorganisms to multiply rapidly.

“Think about how often your car sits in direct sunlight or how warm it gets after you've been driving for a while,” says Urbonas. “These warm, humid conditions are exactly what bacteria need to thrive. Add food debris to the mix, and you've essentially created an incubator.”

Food particles easily become lodged in seat crevices, floor mats, and around the centre console. Even small crumbs can sustain bacterial colonies for extended periods. Unlike a kitchen table that gets wiped down after every meal, these areas often go weeks or months without proper cleaning.

High-touch surfaces present another problem. Steering wheels, gear sticks, and door handles are constantly touched by hands that have been exposed to petrol pumps, cash machines, and countless other contaminated surfaces throughout the day. When drivers eat without washing their hands first, they transfer these contaminants directly to their food.

The Dirtiest Places Inside Your Car

Research into vehicle hygiene has identified the most contaminated areas inside cars, with results that might surprise many drivers:

- **Boot 1,425 bacteria identified:** The car boot harbours the highest concentration of bacterial contamination. Items like shopping bags, sports equipment, and dirty shoes all contribute to this accumulation.
- **Driver's seat 649 bacteria identified:** The seat where most drivers spend hours each week contains nearly 650 different types of bacteria, fed by sweat, dead skin cells, and spilled food.
- **Gearstick 407 bacteria identified:** One of the most frequently touched surfaces in manual vehicles, the gearstick collects bacteria from hands throughout every journey.
- **Back seat 323 bacteria identified:** Often used for transporting shopping bags and passengers, the back seat becomes a repository for various contaminants.
- **Dashboard 317 bacteria identified:** Despite being a hard surface that should be easy to clean, the dashboard's various nooks and air vents trap dust and bacteria.
- **Steering wheel 146 bacteria identified:** Though it has fewer bacteria than other areas, the steering wheel is touched constantly, making it a key transmission point.

“What makes these findings particularly concerning is that the gearstick, dashboard, driver's seat, back seat, and boot all equal or exceed the bacterial contamination typically found on an average toilet seat and flush,” Urbonas points out. “Yet most people would never consider eating their lunch off of a toilet seat.”

What Happens When You Eat in a Contaminated Environment

Urbonas warns that consuming food in a bacteria-rich environment creates multiple health risks. Cross-contamination occurs when bacteria from surfaces transfer to hands, then to food, and finally into the body. This is particularly problematic with foods eaten by hand, such as sandwiches, crisps, or fruit.

“When you're eating in your car, you're usually touching contaminated surfaces and then handling your food without washing your hands,” explains Urbonas. “This direct transfer pathway makes it easy for harmful bacteria to enter your system.”

Respiratory health can also be affected. Mould and fungi that develop in damp areas of the vehicle, such as under floor mats or in air conditioning systems, release spores into the enclosed cabin air. When combined with eating, you're not only consuming food but also inhaling these airborne contaminants.

Digestive problems can result from ingesting bacteria commonly found in vehicle interiors. While healthy immune systems can often fight off low levels of contamination, repeated exposure or particularly high bacterial loads can lead to stomach upset, nausea, or more serious gastrointestinal issues.

How to Make Your Car Safe Enough to Eat In

Urbonas recommends establishing regular cleaning routines to reduce bacterial contamination. Weekly vacuuming removes food debris before it can attract bacteria, while monthly deep cleaning of all surfaces with appropriate disinfectants keeps contamination levels down.

“Use disinfectants specifically designed for automotive interiors,” he advises. “Some household cleaners can damage car materials, but automotive-specific products are formulated to clean effectively without causing harm.”

Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces. Steering wheels, gearsticks, and door handles should be wiped down regularly, ideally after each journey where you've stopped for fuel or touched public surfaces.

Ventilation plays a vital role in maintaining a healthier car interior. Opening windows for a few minutes before eating helps circulate fresh air and reduces humidity levels that bacteria need to multiply. Regular air conditioning maintenance, including filter changes, prevents mould and fungi from colonizing the system and spreading spores throughout the cabin.