

# Seventy Percent of Reusable Medical Scopes Test Positive for Bacteria in New Study from California

A new paper published in the American Journal of Infection Control examined reusable endoscopes cleared for patient use at three separate hospitals in California and found that sanitation procedures are lacking. At the best performing hospital, 62 percent of scopes had positive results for bacteria and potential pathogens. The other two had even higher percentages of bacteria with 85 and 92 percent. While researchers confirmed the lack of antibiotic-resistant superbugs on the scopes, that prospect is a when not an if.

## What Is an Endoscope?

An endoscope is a thin, flexible tube with a light and a camera at the end, usually inserted into the body through the mouth or the anus. They are commonly used to navigate the colon, stomach, and esophagus, although they've also gained popularity as a way to examine the ears, throat, heart, nose, abdomen, urinary tract, and joints. Most of the people who experience endoscopy suffer from gastroesophageal reflux disease, GERD. According to the American Hospitals Association, the lifespans of endoscopes like gastroscopes and colonoscopes range from five to ten years.

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## Why it's Problematic

Not to activate your inner germaphobe, but this should make you wary of medical procedures where they insert something into you to figure out what's going on. Doctors from the American College of Physicians reporting in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that the "Overuse of upper endoscopy contributes to higher health care costs without improving patient outcomes..." Numbers vary, but as many as forty percent of endoscopies don't do anything to improve patient health. Is figuring out exactly what's wrong with you worth inserting years of hospital bacteria into your system?

## Not the First Warning

"Sadly, in the 10 years since we've been looking into the quality of endoscope reprocessing, we haven't seen improvement in the field," said Cori Ofstead, the study's lead author and an epidemiologist in St. Paul, Minn., referring to how the devices are prepared for reuse.

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The issue of properly sterilizing this equipment has been and will continue to be a point of contention for hospitals and regulators. Researchers reported that the two hospitals that showed incredibly high numbers of bacteria reused towels when cleaning scopes, left the devices wet in dirty cabinets, and skipped necessary equipment washing procedures to save time. And they knew they were being watched.

## No Quick Fix

There is no such thing as a benign medical intervention. Being in the same room as someone who has taken antibiotics can affect your own microbiota, and a hospital is a fertile breeding

grounds for hardy and potentially harmful pathogens like C. diff. A bacteria prone to antibiotic resistance, studies have shown rates of C.diff are greatly decreased in facilities that take sanitation seriously. This study found that the best of hospitals only eliminate less than half of bacteria left on reusable medical devices. Something to think about before you schedule your next colonoscopy, perhaps...

## Sources

- *Hospitals and device makers still struggle to rid medical scopes of infectious bacteria* – LA Times
- *Types of Endoscopy* – cancer.net
- *How C. Diff Infections Decrease With fewer Antibiotics* – Organic Lifestyle Magazine
- *Endoscopy Overused in Heartburn Patients* – Web M.D