

Grocery Carts Used To Take Out Trash

7 On Your Side Investigation

 By Michael Finney

Feb. 28 - KGO - A recent study found that grocery carts are among the dirtiest items that we come into contact with - possibly worse than the door-knobs in public bathrooms. But are store employees actually contributing to the grime?

Most everybody would agree that grocery carts are pretty dirty. After all, they're used by countless strangers who may be coughing or sneezing as they shop. But our cameras witnessed store employees actually making the problem worse, using the carts for a task that most consumers already consider disgusting.

ABC7's Michael Finney: "Using their grocery carts to take out their garbage."

Jennifer Miller, Danville: "What? Who does that?"

It's hard to believe, but we found it happens at store after store across the Bay Area -- workers using grocery carts, the kind you put your food in, to take out the store's trash.

We witnessed it both inside stores (some of the video shown was taken using cell phone cameras) as well as outside, in full view of the public, at big-name chain supermarkets as well as smaller grocery stores.

Ben Gale, Santa Clara County Department of Environmental Health: "It's not acceptable."

Ben Gale with the Santa Clara County Department of Environmental Health says county health inspectors can order a store to clean its carts, however, there's no law requiring stores to maintain specific cleaning schedules.

Ben Gale: "You don't have to see garbage dripping off that vehicle to understand that it needs to be cleaned. That's just an accepted good standard business practice."

Stores we contacted about this issue say it's clearly not an acceptable practice, that employees will be told to cut it out, and that the carts will be washed

But cleaning isn't as simple as just hosing down the carts.

Clean Cart Systems is one of the few companies in the state that specializes in sanitation using a high-temperature pressure washer.

Nick Fanourgiakis, Clean Cart Systems: "We're currently working with about 30 grocery stores right now."

Because of California's strict environmental laws, water and the non-toxic chemicals which are used to wash the carts can't go into the sewer, but must be collected and disposed of properly.

Nick Fanourgiakis: "For about 150-200 carts, it could take anywhere from an hour and a half to 2 hours, depending on setup and cleanup."

Stores which use the service can display the "Clean Cart Systems" logo.

Cleaning schedules vary by store, ranging from once a week to once a quarter -- meaning about every three months.

But because not all stores wash carts regularly -- if at all -- many consumers were angry to learn that some store employees use the carts to transport trash to the dumpsters.

Kathia Gamba, San Ramon: "My first concern was my kid, of course. I want my kid to be safe."

Michael Finney: "That was our first concern, that their hand, that's right here right now, ends up in their mouth."

Jennifer Miller, Danville: "And that's where the garbage goes. Super. Well I think it's disgusting."

Disgusting, yes, but is it dangerous or unhealthy?

Dr. Dean Edell, ABC7 Medical Reporter: "It's important to know that germs don't move through your skin. You can touch something filthy, it's not gonna bother you. Most germs do not penetrate your skin."

Washing your hands with soap will kill most topical germs, and some stores -- like Albertsons -- now provide disinfectant wipes, so you can at least wipe the cart handle.

Dr. Dean Edell: "The real question is, how many illnesses are spread this way and that, we don't know."

To be safe, avoid touching your face until you can wash your hands, and if possible, encourage your kids not to put their hands in their mouths while in a store.

Also, don't be afraid to report dirty carts -- and any misuse -- to store management.

Ben Gale: "The loudest voice in cases like that really is the consumer."

Again, we contacted the stores where we actually saw employees using the carts to take trash to dumpsters and were assured this will not continue. By the way, during our investigation we also saw carts filled with old clothes, bottles and cans, even old tires and one of those orange construction zone cones, sitting next to store dumpsters. However, it wasn't clear whether those were left by employees or customers. It should be mentioned that we, customers, need to do our part to help keep the carts clean too.

So if you see an employee using a cart for trash, report it -- to the store and to me. You can send us your [feedback here](#).

>> [Video On Demand: Build Your Own Newscast](#)

Copyright 2006, ABC7/KGO-TV/DT.