

## Paper Towel vs. Electric Hand Dryers in Public Restrooms: Which is Best?

*By the Water Quality & Health Council  
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Consider the public restroom. We may be a bit concerned about how sanitary it is, but when nature calls while we are out and about, the facility is a welcome sight. But how do we utilize public restrooms with minimum risk to our health? Automatic flush toilets, no-touch water faucets, electric hand dryers, and automatic paper towel dispensers all represent a significant leap forward in public health protection. For one thing, these innovations are a far cry from the recirculating cloth roller towels of the past.

Nevertheless, new technologies raise new questions. For example, when given a choice of using disposable paper towels or an electric hand dryer, which is the better choice?

In poorly serviced public restrooms there may be *no* hand-drying options provided. In that case, your only choice could be to wipe your hands on your clothing or wave them about in the air. But *drying your hands thoroughly* may be more important than you think.

That's because wet hands transfer pathogens to other surfaces more efficiently than dry hands.

We evaluated these options for hand drying in public restrooms, listing the advantages and limitations of each so you can decide for yourself.



	<b>Paper Towels</b>	<b>Electric Hand Dryers</b>	<b>No Drying Equipment</b>
<b>Speed and Convenience</b>	Fast and efficient	May take more time than paper towel use, but some models (e.g., “jet” dryers) are very fast	Fast, but potentially unpleasant to leave the restroom with wet, slippery hands
<b>Pathogen Spread</b>	If hands are thoroughly dried and paper towels properly disposed of, paper towels should not significantly spread pathogens to other restroom surfaces	<a href="#">Research shows</a> if hands are not <a href="#">properly washed</a> , pathogens from hands are spread to surrounding surfaces by electric hand dryers, with jet air dryers spreading more pathogens than warm air dryers (some pathogens are already airborne from flushing toilets, which in public restrooms commonly have no lid and can be very forceful)	Pathogen spread is enhanced because <a href="#">research shows</a> pathogens are transferred more quickly from wet hands than dry ones; consider the cross-contamination possible on the handle on the restroom door, for example
<b>Environmental Consideration</b>	Paper is manufactured from cellulose from trees, a renewable natural resource	Hand dryers use electrical energy dependent on local sources; generally speaking, this represents an unknown mix of renewable versus nonrenewable sources	No outside resources expended

Whether you prefer paper towels or an automatic hand dryer, good hand hygiene starts with attention to hand *washing*. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [proper hand washing](#) with soap and water is one of the most important steps you can take to help avoid getting sick and spreading illness to others. If your hands are thoroughly cleaned, spreading pathogens by various drying methods is less of a concern.

*What’s your public restroom hand-drying strategy?*

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