

I don't know when I started chewing my nails. Probably a very long time ago, but when I started doing it my mom tried everything she could to stop me. We tried painting my nails, putting this gross tasting stuff on them, fake nails, and even gloves at one point, but we will get back to that. Anyways, it only really became a problem when I remembered exactly what I was chewing on. Every single thing I touched that day. Tables, chairs, dirt, other hands, pencils, animals, keyboards, bacteria. Under every single nail. And this, is about how a small bad habit harmed my health in a very negative way. So let me ask you, when you think of germs, where is the first place you think, probably kitchen, or more likely, bathrooms.

The first time I feared using a public bathroom was in third grade robotics club. It was an extracurricular that kept me after school for two more hours than usual. One day I needed to go to the bathroom but when I opened the door something just felt off. It seemed almost... creepy. So when my team for the robotics club asked me why I didn't just go into the bathroom, I jokingly told them,

“There was a black hole behind the toilet!” We laughed it off. I don't know where that excuse came from but I guess it worked well. Only now do I know that I was actually afraid of something I couldn't see. Germs.

That was also around the time where I claimed I could “taste dust”, pretty much if I left a glass of water out for too long it started to taste dry. I was afraid it would make me sick so anytime I went back to take a sip after a long time I had to get a new glass because the other one was “contaminated”. I also began inspecting my silverware and dishes; turning over spoons and knives to make sure no suspicious old food stains were there, holding glasses up to a light to see if any dishwasher detergent was still in it. I was afraid of being poisoned by the leftover soap on

our dishes. But let's be honest, who wouldn't be grossed out if they used a dish then realized it had old food on it?

A year later, I was starting a new school and I went to use the bathroom out in the hall, unfortunately there was no lock on the stall. This made me hesitant to use the bathroom, especially since I didn't want to be there in the first place because of germs. As I was in the stall I noticed footsteps, around three or four people had entered the room. These kids were very loud and sounded around 8 or 9. They clearly didn't know I was in there, one kid tried to push open my door but I held it shut. When she realized someone was holding it shut, that just made it more funny to try harder to get in. I still don't know why exactly they did it, But I can only assume they thought I was their friend or something. One of them had already gone into another stall, but these three weren't focused on going to the bathroom, they were determined to make me suffer. All three took turns body slamming into the door. Once I had finished up, I stood up and opened the door, a girl almost slamming into me as I did so. Keep in mind these were all first or second graders, I was a fourth grader. I looked down at them, trying not to scream and yell at them. They were no longer laughing, realizing what they did. I just turned to the sink and washed my hands. None of them moved. No one said anything. They just stared. As I walked back to class afterwards I found myself shaking. I don't know if it was adrenaline or fear but I never went into a bathroom at that school again. I laughed about it uncomfortably to my friends and said it was fine, but it truly did stick with me. Now, on top of the germs, I had another reason to avoid the school bathroom.

So, as covid started this new phobia of germs and things really started kicking in. I invested in a hand sanitizer dispenser bracelet, plastic gloves to wear to school to keep me from chewing my nails, n95 masks, that kind of thing. At this time I was still not using the bathroom,

just going near a public restroom made me shake and my stomach drop. I began picking up habits that weren't good for my health. I stopped drinking and eating while at school or before school to avoid the need for the bathroom during those times. I washed my hands so often they started cracking and bleeding from dryness. Any fruits, vegetables, meats or cheeses over 3 days old at home seemed "unsanitary" to me, an apple with a bruise was bad, a meat that had been in the fridge for a few days was gross, I was paranoid... and for what? I was afraid to be healthy because in my eyes it was unhealthy. I was okay with eating pantry foods like crackers and chips, anything frozen or from other restaurants was fine too, because eating out was fresh and pantry and frozen foods are less perishable and last longer. Going to school wearing bright pink or periwinkle latex gloves was hard. People joked about it a lot, parts of the gloves would rip over the day, and it gave me a sense of claustrophobia. I wasn't willing to risk chewing my nails in a place as full of germs as school. After covid started to die down I began getting better. I didn't keep the hand sanitizer wristband, the gloves, or the masks. I still washed my hands to a gross extent but as summer grew closer I felt myself returning back to a non-toxic level. My hands started feeling better (the dry and cold winter air didn't help their state) and I started to drink a bit more at school. I was testing myself, and the more tests I succeeded at, the better I got. I still avoided the bathrooms, but it wasn't necessarily the germs at this point, it was more the memory of kids walking in on me.

It has been around five years since I was a full blown germaphobe. I still don't use the bathrooms at school but I am okay with that, because now I am eating healthier and drinking more which was the initial worry. Looking back on it now, I am not ashamed of my germophobic self. Yes, I am still not fully over this fear, but now that I have eliminated the unhealthy parts of it I am willing to accept it. Because who knows, maybe if I hadn't become a

part time germaphobe then I wouldn't have avoided that crusty bit of old food on my fork a few years ago, or the germs under my fingernails that I used to chew? It's all about the little things.

Literally.