

Some people have asked if there is any health risk in drinking from the Common Cup at Holy Communion. Here is some information we've found out:

- The CDC has found no documented transmission of any infectious disease has ever been traced to the use of a common communion cup\*
- The consensus of the CDC is that a theoretic risk of transmitting infectious diseases by using a common communion cup exists, but that the risk is so small that it is undetectable.\*
- A study of 681 persons found that people who receive Communion as often as daily are not at higher risk of infection compared with persons who do not receive communion or persons who do not attend Christian church services at all.\*
- Just in case, the CDC suggests that appropriate safeguards are:
  - Wiping the interior and exterior rim between communicants,
  - Use of care to rotate the cloth during use,
  - And use of a clean cloth for each service.
  - At All Souls Anglican Church we do all these things.\*
- A report commissioned for the Anglican Church of Canada notes that intinction (dipping the wafer in) does not diminish the threat of infection, and may actually increase it. Hands, children's and adults', are at least as likely to be a source of infection (often more so) as lips.



### Some practical suggestions to keep us all healthy:

- Wash your hands after using the bathroom.
- If you have an active respiratory infection (*i.e.*, cold or flu) or moist or open sores on their lips (*e.g.*, herpes), it is best not to drink from the cup or dip the wafer in it. Just receive the bread. Or at the very least, go last, so that the only person you risk infecting is the vicar!
- And if you have a problem with your immune system, there are a couple of options:
  - Receive first,
  - Only receive the bread,
  - Or, if you can't make it to church, ask to have someone bring it to you (the consecrated wine is poured into a carrying bottle from the pitcher, not reused from the chalices).



**Is drinking from the common cup risk free?** No. But you are more likely to catch something by shaking someone's hand than by drinking from the common cup. Our sharing in the cup, the blood of Christ, has been part of our Christian faith and practice since Jesus first did it in the Last Supper the night before he was crucified. Please join us.

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\* Data from the *American Journal of Infection Control*, October 1998, Vol. 26, No. 5.

Institution: Public Health Laboratory Service Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, London, U.K.

Title: *The Hazard of Infection from the Shared Communion Cup*. [Review]

Source: *Journal of Infection*. 16(1):3-23, 1988 Jan.

**Abstract:** Interest and concern that the shared communion cup may act as a vehicle for indirectly transmitting infectious disease was reawakened when the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was detected in the saliva of infected persons. Bacteriological experiments have shown that the occasional transmission of micro-organisms is unaffected by the alcoholic content of the wine, the constituent material of the cup or the practice of partially rotating it, but is appreciably reduced when a cloth is used to wipe the lip of the cup between communicants. Nevertheless, transmission does not necessarily imply inoculation or infection.

Consideration of the epidemiology of micro-organisms that may be transmitted via saliva, particularly the herpes group of viruses, suggests that indirect transmission of infection is rare and in most instances a much greater opportunity exists for direct transmission by other means. There is substantial evidence that neither infection with hepatitis B virus nor HIV can be transmitted directly via saliva so that indirect transmission via inanimate objects is even less likely. ***No episode of disease attributable to the shared communion cup has ever been reported.***<sup>1</sup> Currently available data do not provide any support for suggesting that the practice of sharing a common communion cup should be abandoned because it might spread infection. [*References: 129*]

**In 1998, the CDC included this statement in the *American Journal of Infection Control*:**

For more than two decades, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stated an official position to inquirers (*e.g.*, lay public, physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals) about the risk of infectious disease transmission from a common communion cup.

Although no documented transmission of any infectious disease has ever been traced to the use of a common communion cup, a great deal of controversy surrounds this issue; the CDC still continues to receive inquiries about this topic. In this letter, the CDC strives to achieve a balance of adherence to scientific principles and respect for religious beliefs.

Within the CDC, the consensus of the National Center for Infectious Diseases and the National Center for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and Tuberculosis is that a theoretic risk of transmitting infectious diseases by using a common communion cup exists, *but that the risk is so small that it is undetectable.*<sup>2</sup> The CDC has not been called on to investigate any episodes or outbreaks of infectious diseases that have been allegedly linked to the use of a common communion cup. However, outbreaks or clusters of infection might be difficult to detect if:

- (1) a high prevalence of disease (*e.g.*, infectious mononucleosis, influenza, herpes, strep throat, common cold) exists in the community,
- (2) diseases with oral routes of transmission have other modes of transmission (*i.e.*, fecal-oral, hand-to-mouth/nose, airborne),
- (3) the length of the incubation period for the disease is such that other opportunities for exposure cannot be ruled out unequivocally, and
- (4) no incidence data exist for comparison purposes (*i.e.*, the disease is not on the reportable disease list and therefore is not under public health surveillance).

Experimental studies have shown that bacteria and viruses can contaminate a common communion cup and survive despite the alcohol content of the wine. Therefore, an ill person or asymptomatic carrier drinking from the common cup could potentially expose other members of the congregation to pathogens present in saliva. Were any diseases transmitted by this practice, they most likely would be common viral illnesses, such as the common cold. However, a recent study of 681 persons found that people who receive Communion as often as daily are not at higher risk of infection compared with persons who do not receive communion or persons who do not attend Christian church services at all.



In summary, the risk for infectious disease transmission by a common communion cup is very low, and appropriate safeguards -- that is, wiping the interior and exterior rim between communicants, use of care to rotate the cloth during use, and use of a clean cloth for each service -- would further diminish this risk. In addition, churches may wish to consider advising their congregations that sharing the communion cup is discouraged if a person has an active respiratory infection (*i.e.*, cold or flu) or moist or open sores on their lips (*e.g.*, herpes).

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<sup>1</sup> *Emphasis ours.*