

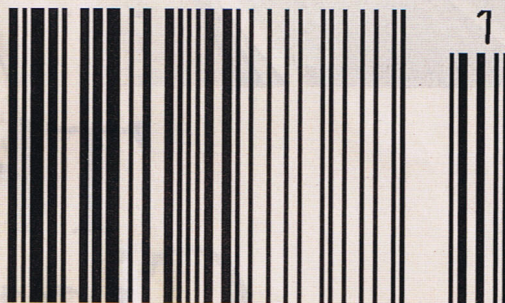


# ATL

ATLANTA GA APRIL

## ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE ATLANTA AIRPORT

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# Ewww! Cooties!

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

**T**he closer you get to the front of the line, the more it feels like an amateur striptease competition—jackets yanked off and belts jerked from pants; laptops pulled from cases; cell phones, jewelry, and hairclips clanking into the gray bins, now filled with potentially troublesome adornments. As you approach the security checkpoint, there's only one task left: It's time to get footloose!

Amazed, you watch other passengers (many of whom would hop themselves into a one-legged tizzy before allowing their precious tootsies to so much as graze the gym locker room

floor) casually barefoot it across what is probably the most heavily traveled area in the world's busiest airport. More than 40,000 passengers from all corners of the planet traverse the security area every day.

Post-9/11 America has its perils and responsibilities, and thanks to delinquents like "shoe bomber" Richard Reid, those now include practically stripping down to your skivvies just to board a flight to, say, Savannah. Attempting to stay on top of homeland security is commendable and all, but have you ever considered all the disgusting germs on Hartsfield-Jackson's floor?

Veteran microbiologist Gopal Batra, president and CEO of Biosystems Atlanta, hadn't—until we asked him about the pesky pathogens that could be hiding there. Batra, who has a Ph.D. in microbiology and has worked with the Department of Agriculture, uses words like "staphylococcus" and "bacterium Escherichia Coli" (aka *E. coli*) while brainstorming about the cooties that could be playing hide-and-seek in the crevices of your foot as you walk through.

Don't let those glistening floors fool you. According to Batra, it's likely that fungi, yeast, bacteria, and molds—some of which could make you sick—are lurking in such a heavy-traffic area. The company contracted to clean Hartsfield-Jackson's floors didn't respond when asked how often the area is washed.

"I don't mean to be an alarmist, but hundreds of thousands of people are passing through that area, and there should be a level of concern because we don't know the health of all these people," notes Batra. "If someone were sick, he or she could very well contaminate the floor, and all those people walking barefoot could pick up some of the potentially harmful microorganisms. With all those different people boarding airplanes for all over the world, these germs could conceivably be carried thousands of miles, from continent to continent. It's definitely something the CDC and state health department should be monitoring."

Though not life-threatening, many common pathogens likely to be found on the airport floor can have ill effects, particularly for children and others with compromised immune systems. Penicillium, for example, can cause allergic reactions in those prone to rashes and allergies, the mold *stachybotrys chartarum* can cause respiratory problems, and fecal-related bacteria can cause diarrhea and stomach ailments. At least at the gym, your biggest concern is a bad case of athlete's foot.

Aside from encouraging airports to provide "impervious booties" (not a bad idea according to Batra), he says there isn't much law-abiding travelers can do, other than wear socks to reduce "skin-to-skin" contact with potentially harmful microorganisms.

"Just be aware that the floor may be contaminated, and try not to walk barefoot as much as possible," advises Batra. "Because the skin is a living tissue, it is more likely to harbor pathogens. With socks, those pathogens are less likely to remain alive, and that'll greatly decrease the amount of risk."