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Sharing musical instruments not always healthy for kids

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Attention budding trumpet and saxophone players. Clean your instruments!

That's the warning from Oklahoma State University researchers who examined brass and woodwind instruments shared by school students and found they were germ-laden and acted as potential "reservoirs of disease."

Micro-organisms linked to asthma, skin infections and other illnesses and allergies were found on 13 instruments used by a small-town high school band, they reported in a study published in the March/April issue of the journal *General Dentistry*. More than half of the instruments, which included clarinets, trombones, trumpets, saxophones and oboes, hadn't even been used in the previous month.

While the study was small, it struck a sour note for disease transmission, said lead author Dr. R. Thomas Glass, professor of forensic sciences, pathology and dental medicine at Oklahoma State.

Researchers took swabs from 117 sites on mouthpieces, internal chambers and cases. What they found surprised and alarmed them: 442 different bacteria, including species of staphylococcus, 58 types of mould and 19 yeasts — similar to what's commonly found on dentures, athletic mouthguards and toothbrushes.

While most contamination was in reeds and mouthpieces, there were enough microbes at midpoints and opposite ends of the instruments to transmit illnesses and expose the musicians to toxins, the study found.

According to anecdotal reports from the teacher, half the band students at any given time had experienced respiratory ailments like asthma or bronchitis.

Glass says he doesn't want to alarm parents or discourage music participation, but "we want them to be aware that musical instruments can transmit diseases," even after long periods without being played.

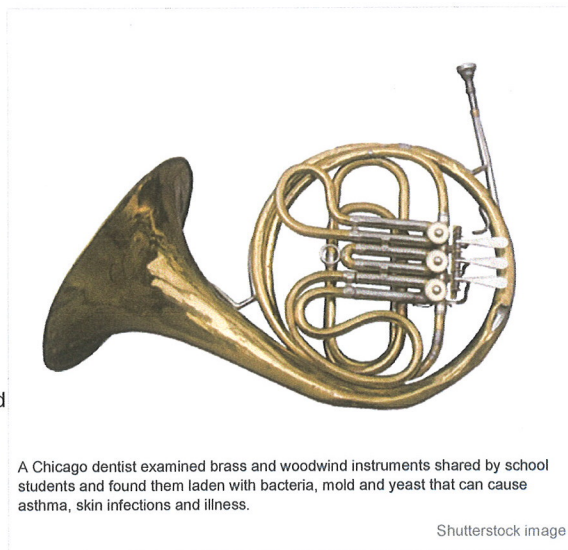
Music staff at the Toronto District School Board were not available to comment. But Ted Sparks of Toronto retailer St. John's Music says there are steps kids can take to protect their health, starting with simple hygiene.

"It's most important to keep the mouthpiece clean, because that's the point of contact," says Sparks, repair and service manager with St. John's, which sells, rents and services instruments.

He advises detaching mouthpieces and washing with dish soap and hot water after every use. Even if students have to share school instruments, they can purchase their own detachable mouthpiece for under \$50, he says. Reeds aren't shared and music classrooms typically have sterilizing baths for players to regularly clean their mouthpieces.

Glass says players should take apart their instruments each week and wipe with a damp cloth to remove the biofilm that acts as a breeding ground for germs. Music stores also sell chemical dips that can be used to sanitize.

He also recommends sterilizing an instrument with ethylene oxide every time it is passed along to a new player, which can be done at music shops. If it is only used by one player, sterilize once a year, or if the child experiences recurrent infections.



A Chicago dentist examined brass and woodwind instruments shared by school students and found them laden with bacteria, mold and yeast that can cause asthma, skin infections and illness.

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