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Germs. Toxins. Mold. Stress. The Housewares Industry Looks to Arm Us Against Domestic Threats.

Avian flu poultry timers. Toothbrush sanitizers. UV ray sensors. Anti-mite mattress sprays.

Domestic life in 2006 is under attack. And the housewares industry is arming us to fight back against the fear factor.

The American consumer today is worried about diseases, toxic chemicals, body fat and indoor air quality. BlackBerry-weary workers are over-stressed and would like a massage when they get home. They want kitchen appliances that can do everything except actually serve the tacos, and would like to avoid touching anything creepy that might spread germs.

"It's getting scarier out there for a lot of people. We've heard about anthrax and mad cow disease and all the mold contamination in the Katrina states," says Lisa Casey Weiss, lifestyle consultant for the International Housewares Association, which held its annual trade show here March 12-14 for 2,100 exhibitors and 60,000 attendees. "The home is where people used to feel protected from those outside influences. Now, we are grasping for those products that enable us to get a better sense of self-protection."

The wave of products designed to allay consumer fears started building over the past few decades with home fire extinguishers, carbon monoxide detectors and antibacterial wipes. Today, manufacturers are trying to empower consumers to take control of issues such as food safety, blood pressure and pet odors. Sometimes science doesn't totally support the need for -- or the efficiency of -- these products.

We used to be fearful of moths munching holes in our sweaters. Now we are scared of pesticides penetrating our Granny Smiths. Enter the Tersano Lotus Sanitizing System, a flashy new countertop kitchen appliance advertised as using "ozone technology" to kill toxins in fruits and vegetables in its "sanitizing bowl."

Worried your leftover meatballs might have spoiled after too many days in the fridge? Taylor Precision Products, a major manufacturer of thermometers and scales, has introduced Timestrips, which act as "visual alarm clocks" for food, telling consumers when it's time to toss. (What ever happened to the senses of smell and sight?) Is yucky pet hair and dander floating around the house? The Arm & Hammer Pet Fresh Odor Grabber was designed to zap Fluffy's embarrassing smells. Does ironing make you nervous? The new Oliso iron with the Auto-Lift System has little feet that shoot out when you pause your ironing, keeping the iron in a more stable, horizontal position.

Some marketers like to throw around scary words and phrases, such as SARS and avian flu. In fact, as you walk down the packed aisles of 50,000 products at the housewares show in the McCormick Place Convention Center, your gaze catches anxiously on a rack of fliers at the M.E. Heuck Co. booth with the jaw-dropping headline "Avian Flu Poultry Timers."

According to health officials, the dreaded bird flu virus has not been found in the United States. The Ohio company hoped to attract the attention of buyers in Asia and Europe, areas where pop-up chicken and turkey timers are virtually unknown and where cases of bird flu have been confirmed. In some European countries, such as France and Italy, consumption of chicken has plummeted because of fears of the deadly disease.

Steve Johnson, senior vice president at Heuck, acknowledges that he has seen no evidence from public health officials that someone could get the disease from eating infected poultry or eggs. Health experts say that cooking chicken to an internal temperature of 170-180 degrees Fahrenheit would kill any virus. Johnson says sales of Heuck disposable pop-up timers in England are soaring, from only 10,000 sold last year to well over 1 million this year. He says the avian flu sales pitch is "just to call attention to the fact" that cooking to the proper temperature "would kill the virus if it was in there."

Some products are coming onto the consumer market directly from the health-care industry. At iTouchless Innovation Housewares & Products, they offer an alternative to constantly wiping down your germy kitchen or bathroom trash can with antibacterial wipes: a "smart" stainless steel trash can that opens automatically when it detects movement. According to Michael Shek, iTouchless director of marketing, the can uses infrared and smart-chip technology to open when you approach and closes automatically after a few seconds. The Touchless Trashcan has been used in hospitals, nursing homes, schools and day-care centers, and is available at Target online for \$100. Take comfort in the fact that Shek says hospitals in China and Hong Kong bought tons of these during the SARS epidemic.

Although we were skeptical when we first heard about the Violight Travel Toothbrush Sanitizer, as frequent travelers, we got a little panicked when we heard talk about the "potentially pathogenic organisms" that might lurk on hotel bathroom counters. The original Violight toothbrush sanitizer was introduced in 2004. A sleek silver docking station for four brushes, it was designed by the fab Philippe Starck and uses a germicidal ultraviolet bulb to zap germs and bacteria.

According to Violight vice president and co-founder Jonathan Pinsky, the \$50 unit first catered to "germophobic people that had a higher sense of hygiene and cleanliness," but as the device won design awards from Time magazine and others, it caught on, and Violight has sold tens of thousands at retailers such as Sharper Image and Amazon.com. "Sure, it does fit into the fear factor," says Pinsky, "but even your dentist will tell you that if you have strep throat you should throw away your toothbrush. This prevents cross-contamination. It's just good hygiene."

The new travel version (\$29.95) deals with what Pinsky calls the "gross" problem of toothbrushes that have hung out in hotels or in gym bags and then are stored in dark environments that are perfect breeding grounds for germs.

What does this new world of domestic anxiety and spinoff products say about us? Jaedene R. Levy, a Washington psychotherapist, says the current fear factor goes back to 9/11, when many people experienced a loss of control. "We realized there is nothing we can do about terrorism. But what we can do is control some things in our homes," says Levy. She says people are using these products as safety nets. "If we can keep the bedbugs out of our beds or the radon out of our basement, it's going to make us feel better."