

Hand Washing: Reducing the Risk of Common Infections

Is it important to wash your hands?

Simply put, yes. Hand washing is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of infections. You can spread certain "germs" casually by touching another person. You can also catch germs when you touch contaminated objects or surfaces and then you touch your face (mouth, eyes, and nose).

"Good" hand washing techniques include using an adequate amount of soap, rubbing the hands together to create friction, and rinsing under running water. The use of gloves is not a substitute for hand washing.

When should I wash my hands?

Different situations where people can pick up "germs" include:

- when hands are visibly soiled
- after using the washroom (includes changing diapers)
- after blowing your nose or after sneezing in your hands
- before and after eating, handling food, drinking or smoking
- after touching raw meat, poultry, or fish
- after handling garbage
- visiting or caring for sick people
- handling pets, animals or animal waste

Ensuring that you wash your hands properly after using the washroom is very important in reducing transmission of disease. Using soap and lathering up is very important (rinsing hands in water only is not as effective). Use comfortably warm, running water. Hands should be washed for a minimum of 15 seconds - longer if the hands are visibly soiled. To help people wash long enough, one option may be to sing a short song such as "Happy Birthday" or "A, B, C" twice.

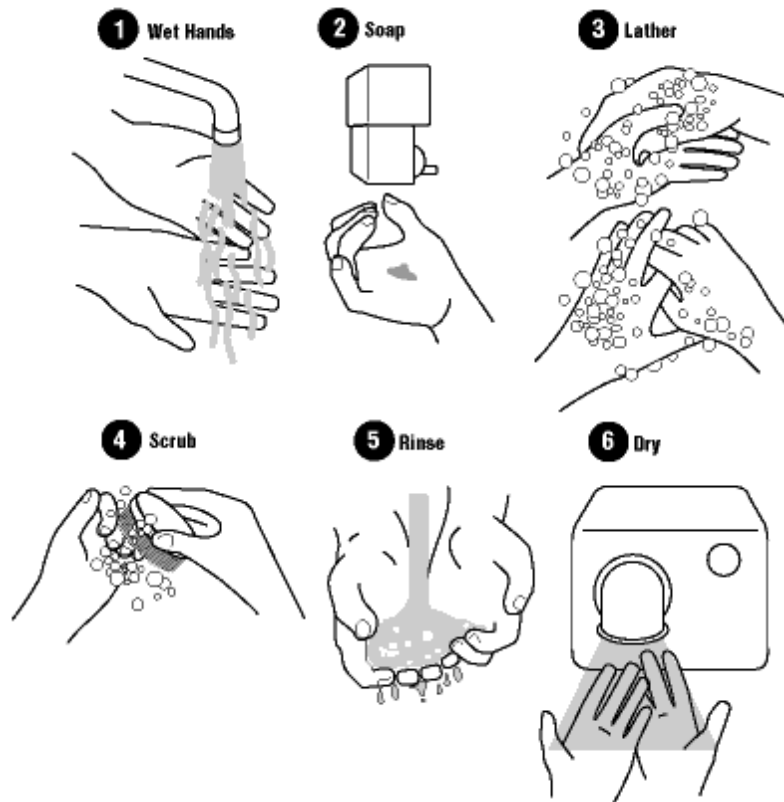
How do I properly wash my hands?

For effective hand washing, follow these steps:

- remove any rings or other jewelry
- use warm water and wet your hands thoroughly
- use soap (1-3 mL) and lather very well
- scrub your hands, between your fingers, wrists, and forearms with soap for 15 seconds
- scrub under your nails
- rinse thoroughly
- turn off the taps/faucets with a paper towel
- dry your hands with a single use towel or air dryer
- protect your hands from touching dirty surfaces as you leave the bathroom

Other tips include:

- Cover cuts with bandages and wear gloves for added protection (cuts are very vulnerable to infections).
- Artificial nails and chipped nail polish have been associated with an increase in the number of bacteria on the fingernails. Be sure to clean the nails properly.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Assume that contact with any human body fluids is infectious.
- Liquid soap in disposable containers is best. If using reusable containers, they should be washed and dried before refilling. If using a bar of soap, be sure to set it on a rack that allows water to drain or use small bars that can be changed frequently.



What about antibacterial soaps and waterless hand scrubs?

While it is true that regular soap and water does not actually kill microorganisms (they create a slippery surface that allows the organisms to "slide off"), antibacterial soaps are typically considered to be "overkill" for most purposes. The exception may be in a hospital where special situations are present (e.g., before invasive procedures, when caring for severely immunocompromised patients, critical care areas, intensive care nurseries, etc.). Antibacterial agents should be chosen carefully based on their active ingredients and characteristics, and when persistent antimicrobial activity on the hands is desired.

When there is no soap or water available, one alternative is to use waterless hand scrubs. Some of these products are made of ethyl alcohol mixed with emollients (skin softeners) and other agents. They are often available as a rinse, or on wipes or towelettes. They can be used by paramedics, home care attendants, or other mobile workers where hand washing facilities are not available. However, these agents are not effective when the hands are heavily contaminated with dirt, blood, or other organic materials. In addition, waterless hand scrubs may have a drying effect on the skin and may have odours which may be irritating to some users.

source: http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/washing_hands.html

Safety Talk Discussion

Be Accountable: Choose safety - work safe - and go home injury free!