

Wash Your Hands!

Serious diseases like salmonella and Hepatitis A can be spread by fecal-oral transmission. Even the tiniest particles of fecal material can spread these bacteria. Other diseases are spread by the residue of saliva and mucous.

Fortunately, hand washing can usually get rid of these substances and their hitchhiking bacteria. In fact, hand washing is one of the most powerful of all weapons against infectious disease. Washing your hands can destroy millions of bacteria with a whoosh of the faucet. But do you know the correct way to wash your hands?

According to the National Consumers League, one out of four visits to the doctor's office is a result of an infectious disease, such as a cold, the flu or food poisoning, usually caused by the kind of germs that common hand washing eliminates.

Infectious disease specialists have investigated the process of hand washing in microscopic detail. Recently, Janet M. Serkey, RN, and Gerri S. Hall, Ph.D., of The Cleveland Clinic, reviewed what is known about hand washing and its value in the health care setting in the Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine. Some of what they found will be of value to you as well.

To begin with, what's the correct procedure for washing your hands? Here are the guidelines from the Association for Practitioners in Infection Control (APIC):

- Wet the hands with running water and distribute soap or other sanitizing agent evenly over all surfaces.
- Next, apply mechanical friction by rubbing the hands together for 10 to 15 seconds, making sure that all fingers and webs and the back of the hands receive attention. (The 10 to 15 seconds are important to allow sufficient contact of the antiseptic agent and adequate friction.)
- Finally, thoroughly rinse and dry hands without re-contaminating them. Effective hand washing takes at least one minute.

The purpose of washing the hands is to remove possible harmful bacteria from the skin. Soap and water are suitable for removing surface bacteria in everyday settings. But no amount of washing is effective if you are wearing rings or artificial nails. These impede the removal of bacterial and serve as breeding grounds for microorganisms. Even natural nails that are overly long can harbor stubborn colonies of bacteria.

In a laboratory study of 100 health care workers divided into two groups (those wearing rings and those not wearing rings), the mean total skin bacterial colony counts for the workers with rings were higher both before and after the hand washing. There is evidence that artificial or long fingernails may have been responsible for a disease outbreak at a hospital some years back.

Here is more information about hand washing from other sources.

Recently, alcohol-based hand-sanitizers have become a popular way of washing up where soap and water are not available. Experts, however, caution that alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not a substitute for soap and water, and are ideally used in conjunction with the wet, bubbly stuff. Soap and water perform the crucial functions of lifting the bacteria from its oily base, and carrying it away from the skin. (And don't skip the soap. Studies have shown that washing with water alone removes no bacteria whatsoever.)

What about antibacterial soap? Researchers have found that antibacterial soap removes 97 percent of bacteria on the hands. Washing with ordinary soap removes 95 percent of the bacteria on the hands. Not a very big difference. It has been suggested that how you wash your hands is far more important than whether or not you use antibacterial soap.

Another critical factor is habit. You need to make it a habit to wash your hands before you eat, after you use the toilet, after you've been outdoors, after touching an animal, after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose, before you prepare food or touch dishes, after caring for a sick person, or after cleaning up.

Since habits are acquired early, it is important that children get into the hand washing habit. Supervise them. Nag them. You'll be glad you did.