



Hand Washing

"Wash your hands!" How many times have you heard that from your parents? You might think they're just nagging you, but actually the most important thing you can do to keep from getting sick is to wash your hands.

If you don't wash your hands well and often, you can pick up germs from other sources and then infect yourself. You're at risk every time you touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. In fact, one of the most common ways people catch colds is by rubbing their nose or their eyes after the cold virus has gotten on their hands.

If people don't wash their hands often (especially when they're sick), they can spread germs directly to other people or onto surfaces that others touch. And before you know it, everyone around you is coming down with something!

The First Line of Defense Against Germs

Think about all of the things that you touched today — from the telephone to the toilet. Maybe you blew your nose or played with your dog. Whatever you did, you came into contact with germs. It's easy for germs on your hands to end up in your mouth.

By frequently washing your hands the right way, you'll wash away germs — such as bacteria and viruses — that you have picked up from other people, through contaminated water and food, from surfaces like keyboards, or from animals and animal waste.

Defensive Hand Washing

In 2010 the American Society for Microbiology and the American Cleaning Institute did a survey of hand washing. They asked people questions about their hand-washing habits and also watched people in public restrooms. The results were kind of gross. For example:

- People don't always wash their hands after using the bathroom — 96% of adults say they always wash their hands after using public restrooms, but just 85% were seen doing so.
- People wash their hands less at home — 89% say they wash their hands after using the bathroom at home. Germs are germs, and a bathroom is a bathroom.
- Just 27% wash their hands after handling money (which can carry loads of germs).
- Only 42% of the people in the survey washed up after petting a dog or cat. You've seen your dog roll in that mystery object in the park or your cat rub against you after using the litter pan. Fido and Fluffy are dirtier than you might think.

Even if you're a good hand-washer, your friends may be harboring some dirty little secrets: Students don't wash their hands often or well. In one study, only 58% of female and 48% of male middle- and high-school students washed their hands after using the bathroom. Yuck!

How to Wash Your Hands Correctly

There's a right way to wash your hands. Follow these simple steps to keep your hands clean:

- Use warm water (not cold or hot).
- Use whatever soap you like. Antibacterial soaps are popular but regular soap works fine.
- Rub your hands together well and scrub all surfaces: Lather up on both sides of your hands, your wrists, between your fingers, and around your nails. **Wash for 20 seconds.**
- Rinse well under warm running water and pat dry with a clean towel.
- In public restrooms, consider using a paper towel to flush the toilet and open the door because toilet and door handles harbor germs. Throw the towel away after you leave.

To prevent chapping or dry skin, use a mild soap with warm water, pat rather than rub hands dry, and apply a moisturizing lotion afterward.

If soap and water aren't available, waterless hand sanitizers, soaps, or scrubs are a good alternative. They're usually available as a liquid, wipes, spray, or towelettes, and often come in small travel sizes that are perfect for keeping in your book bag, car, locker, purse, or sports bag.

Good hand washing is the key to preventing the spread of many common infections. Protect yourself by lathering up!

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