



CDC Features

Wash Your Hands



Keeping hands clean is one of the most important ways to prevent the spread of infection and illness.

Handwashing is a simple thing and it's the best way to prevent infection and illness.

Clean hands prevent infections. Keeping hands clean prevents illness at home, at school, and at work. Hand hygiene practices are key prevention tools in healthcare settings, in daycare facilities, in schools and public institutions, and for the safety of our food.

In healthcare settings, handwashing can prevent potentially fatal infections from spreading from patient to patient and from patient to healthcare worker and vice-versa. The basic rule in the hospital is to cleanse hands before and after each patient contact by either washing hands or using an alcohol-based hand rub.

At home, handwashing can prevent infection and illness from spreading from family member to family member and, sometimes, throughout a community. In the home, the basic rule is to wash hands before preparing food and after handling uncooked meat and poultry, before eating, after changing diapers, after coughing, sneezing, or blowing one's nose into a tissue, and after using the bathroom.

Wash Your Hands: The Right Way

When washing hands with soap and water:

- Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 15-20 seconds. Need a timer? Imagine singing "Happy Birthday" twice through to a friend.
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use your paper towel to turn off the faucet.
- Always use soap and water if your hands are visibly dirty.

If soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub to clean your hands. Alcohol-based hand rubs significantly reduce the number of germs on skin and are fast-acting.

When using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer:

- Apply product to the palm of one hand.
- Rub hands together.
- Rub the product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry.

Handwashing: The Beginning of Infection Control

Ignaz Semmelweis, an Austrian-Hungarian physician, first demonstrated over 150 years ago that hand hygiene can prevent the spread of disease. Hand hygiene as a practice includes performing handwashing, or using antiseptic handwash, alcohol-based hand rub, or surgical hand hygiene/antiseptics.

Dr. Semmelweis worked in a hospital in Vienna whose maternity patients were dying at such an alarming rate that they begged to be sent home¹. Most of those dying had been treated by student physicians who worked on corpses during an anatomy class before beginning their rounds in the maternity ward.

Because the students did not wash their hands effectively between touching the dead and the living—handwashing was an unrecognized hygienic practice at the time—pathogenic bacteria from the corpses regularly were transmitted to the mothers via the students' hands.

The result was a death rate five times higher for mothers who delivered in one clinic of the hospital than for mothers who delivered at another clinic not attended by the student physicians.



In an experiment considered quaint at best by his colleagues, Dr. Semmelweis insisted that his students wash their hands before treating the mothers—and deaths on the maternity ward fell fivefold.

Unquestioned today as the most important tool in the healthcare worker's arsenal for preventing infection, handwashing was not readily accepted in Dr. Semmelweis's era. Indeed, his pleas to make handwashing a routine practice throughout the hospital were largely met with derision. Another 50 years would pass before the importance of handwashing as a preventive measure would be widely accepted by the medical profession. Sanitation is now a standard and thousands of lives have been saved because of Dr. Semmelweis's discovery.



¹ Semmelweis I. Etiology, concept, and prophylaxis of childbed fever. Carter KC, ed. 1st ed. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983.

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