

Newsletter

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Get the dirt on clean hands!

Public Health Agency of Canada www.publichealth.gc.ca

Preventing the flu is everyone's responsibility!

Influenza or the flu is a common, infectious respiratory disease that begins in your nose and throat. It is highly contagious and spreads rapidly from person to person.

Hands spread an estimated 80 percent of common infectious diseases like the common cold and flu. For example, when you touch a doorknob that has the flu virus on it and then touch your mouth, you can get sick. But these disease-causing germs slide off easily with good handwashing technique.

Handwashing is easy to learn, cheap and incredibly effective at stopping the spread of disease-causing germs.

When should I wash my hands?

Wash your hands several times a day with soap and warm water, especially:

- before meals
- before feeding children, including breastfeeding
- before and after preparing food
- after using the toilet
- after changing diapers or helping a child use the toilet
- after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
- after playing with shared toys
- before and after visiting with people who are sick
- after handling animals or their waste.

What are germs and are they all bad?

The word germs is a general term for different types of tiny organisms. Bacteria and viruses are examples of two different types of germs. Bacteria are virtually everywhere in our environment and make up 60 per cent of the living matter on earth. Of the billions of types of bacteria only about 50 are known to cause infection.

Viruses cause far more illnesses than bad bacteria because they spread more easily. If more than one person in your family has the same sickness, odds are it is a viral infection. Cold and flu viruses invade our cells and rapidly grow in number causing symptoms like runny nose, cough, aches and sore throats.

Where do germs live?

If you had to pick the place in your house with the most disease-causing germs, what would you choose? Many of us automatically think of the bathroom toilet seat or bathroom floor. But you may be surprised to learn that the kitchen is the biggest hot-zone for disease-causing germs. Top prize goes to the kitchen sink, followed by the dishrag or sponge.

Germs can live for a surprisingly long time on hard surfaces like desks, doorknobs and tables. Most people get sick when they touch something that is contaminated with germs and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. The easiest way to reduce your chance of getting sick is to wash your hands often with regular soap and water and avoid touching your face.

What kind of soap should I use? Plain or antibacterial soap?

Antibacterial soaps and cleaners are readily available - there are hundreds of brands on the market. Yet, antibacterial soaps offer no benefit over regular, plain soaps in preventing common illnesses.

Antibacterial soaps contain antibiotics in amounts that kill some of the germs on your skin. When you use antibacterial soaps the bacteria at the edge of the soap line are exposed to only a little bit of antibiotic. These bad germs survive and become resistant (they can't be killed) to that particular antibiotic. They can also transfer their antibiotic resistance to good germs.

Plain, ordinary soap has ingredients that help to remove dirt and grease from your skin. The mechanical action of handwashing - rubbing your hands together with soap and water - breaks down the tiny bits of grease, fat and dirt on your hands that bad germs cling to. Soap doesn't actually kill the bad germs, instead, it's the combination of soap, rubbing, rinsing and drying that helps these bugs slide off your hands.

The bottom line: plain soap and good handwashing technique are the best way to remove the dirt and grease that attract bad bacteria.

What about alcohol-based hand cleansers?

Both alcohol-based hand sanitizers and soap and water have a place in prevention of infections. You should use an alcohol sanitizer when you are out and not able to wash your hands—for example, at the mall or after riding public transit. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers don't contain antibiotics. But the alcohol kills both good and bad bacteria on your skin so use it sparingly. And keep in mind that they don't work well if you have a lot of dirt and grease on your hands.

How to wash your hands - 7 tips

1. Remove all rings and wet your hands with warm running water.
2. Put a small amount of liquid soap in the palm of one hand. Bar soaps are not as hygienic as liquid soaps because they stay moist and attract germs. If a bar soap is the only option it should be stored on a rack so that the bar doesn't sit in water.
3. Rub your hands together for 20 seconds so you produce lather. Make sure you scrub between your fingers, under your fingernails and the backs of your hands.
4. Rinse your hands well with clean running water for at least 10 seconds. Try not to handle the faucets once your hands are clean. Use a paper towel to turn off the water.
5. Dry your hands with a single use paper towel. If you use a hand towel be sure to change it daily. During cold and flu season you may want to give each family member his or her own hand towel.
6. Use hand lotion to put moisture back into your skin if your hands are dry.
7. Model good handwashing technique to your children. Have them sing a song like Twinkle Twinkle Little Star while rubbing their hands together to teach them the amount of time it takes to clean their hands properly.