

Handwashing Awareness

Handwashing helps stop germs and harmful substances from being passed around. Wash your hands for better health!

Wash Your Hands for Better Health

The eyes, nose and mouth are pathways through which substances enter the body. People frequently touch these body parts and may transfer germs and chemicals without even realizing it.

Germs and chemicals can also get into food and drinks being prepared or consumed.

Handshakes and being in contact with frequently touched surfaces are ways that germs and chemicals pass from one person to another. Things touched by people can transfer germs, for example:

- Doorknobs
- Stairway handrails
- Bathroom sinks
- Subway hand holds
- Money
- Elevator buttons
- Tools
- Children's toys

You cannot see tiny germs and the smallest traces of chemicals. Wash your hands anytime you feel that they might be dirty, but always wash your hands when performing tasks such as:

- Medical care and dental care
- Food handling, food preparation and food service
- Contact with anything potentially unclean (animals, garbage)
- Use of tobacco products, using restrooms, applying cosmetics and lip balm, eating, drinking or consuming medications, and inserting or removing contact lenses

Handwashing Techniques

Hand Sanitizers

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be considered in addition to proper handwashing and when handwashing is not possible.

- Use a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol
- Apply the sanitizer to the palm of one hand and rub it all over the surfaces of both hands until your hands are dry

Soap and water are needed when hands are visibly soiled or greasy or when they are contaminated with chemicals or irritants. Hand sanitizers do not eliminate all types of germs, such as norovirus, a major cause of gastroenteritis or stomach flu.

Handwashing Techniques

Follow these handwashing procedures:

1. Wet your hands with clean, running water and lather with soap.
2. Scrub all parts of your hands and under your nails for at least 20 seconds.
3. Rinse them under clean, running water.
4. Dry them using an unused towel or air.

Drying Hands

Drying is critical to reducing recontamination. Dry your hands with a single-use towel. Paper towels are a more hygienic way to dry your hands because they can physically remove contaminants with less chance of recontamination.

Buttons, levers and crank towel dispensers are sources of recontamination. Touch-free faucets, soap dispensers and towel dispensers minimize cross contamination.

Handwashing Tips

The sink, including the faucet controls, may be contaminated. Consider turning on and off the faucet using a dry paper towel.

Wash around and under rings, but know that rings and jewelry may be prohibited in some workplaces. You cannot be sure jewelry isn't harboring germs and other contaminants.

Protect your hands from touching dirty surfaces as you leave the bathroom.

Employers need to determine alternate methods of handwashing if sinks and a public source of cleaning running water are not available. There are options to bring in clean water and set up handwashing stations.

Healthy Skin and Nails

Healthy skin is a barrier to infection, whereas compromised skin is vulnerable, so report any discomfort from handwashing. Gentler soaps may reduce chapping and irritation. Moisturizing lotions may help, but some lotions degrade rubber gloves, so always follow your employer's recommendations. Diligently clean and trim fingernails since they may harbor dirt and germs.

Gloves

Wearing gloves does not replace the need for adequate, effective handwashing!

- Gloves may have small, undetectable defects
- Gloves may be torn during use
- Do not wash your gloves as a way to avoid changing them
- Wash your hands before putting on gloves since bacteria can multiply in the warm environment inside of gloves
- Wash your hands immediately after removing gloves

If you work in a healthcare setting and use disposable gloves, change your gloves after each patient contact and wash your hands after removing your gloves! When you remove your gloves, you may contaminate your hands. Practice proper removal techniques to minimize touching the outside of a glove with your bare hand. Remember also that gloves can pick up bacteria from dirty surfaces and transfer them to food and others. Gloves need to be changed according to your employer's policies and procedures.