



Handwashing

Disease Fact Sheet

Why is handwashing important?

Handwashing, when done correctly, is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Good handwashing technique is easy to learn and can significantly reduce the spread of infectious diseases among children and adults.

What types of disease can good handwashing prevent?

- Diseases spread through fecal-oral transmission can be reduced by good handwashing. Infections that may be transmitted through this route include salmonellosis, shigellosis, hepatitis A, giardiasis, enterovirus, amebiasis and campylobacteriosis. Because these diseases are spread through the ingestion of even the tiniest particles of fecal material, handwashing after using the toilet is very important.
- Diseases spread through indirect contact with respiratory secretions can be reduced by good handwashing. Microorganisms that may be transmitted through this route include influenza, Streptococcus, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and the common cold. Because these diseases may be spread indirectly by hands contaminated with respiratory secretions of infected people, illness may be avoided by washing hands after coughing or sneezing and after shaking hands with someone who has been coughing and sneezing.
- Diseases may also be spread when hands are contaminated with urine, saliva or other moist body substances. Microorganisms transmitted by one or more body substances include cytomegalovirus, typhoid, staphylococcal organisms and Epstein-Barr virus. These organisms may be transmitted from person to person or indirectly by contamination of food or objects such as toys.

What is good handwashing technique?

There is more to handwashing than you think! By rubbing your hands vigorously with soapy water, you pull the dirt and the oily soils free from your skin. The soap lather suspends the dirt and germs trapped inside, which are then quickly rinsed away.

Follow these four simple steps to keep hands clean:

1. Wet your hands with warm running water.
2. Add soap, then rub your hands together, making a soapy lather. Do this away from the running water for at least 20 seconds, being careful not to wash the lather away. Wash the front and back of your hands, as well as between your fingers and under your nails.
3. Rinse your hands well under warm running water. Let the water run back into the sink, not down to your elbows.
4. Dry your hands thoroughly with a clean towel. Then turn off the water with a clean paper towel and dispose of it in a proper receptacle.

What type of soap should be used?

Any type of soap may be used. Bar soap should be kept in a self-draining holder that is cleaned thoroughly before new bars are placed in holders. Liquid soap containers should be used until empty and cleaned before refilling. Soap containers used in community settings (e.g., day care centers, long-term care facilities and rest rooms) should be disposable, and discarded when empty.

To prevent chapping, use a mild soap with warm water; pat rather than rub hands dry; and apply lotion liberally and frequently.

What are some mistakes I should avoid regarding handwashing?

- **Do not** use a single damp cloth to wash a group of children's hands.
- **Do not** use a standing basin of water to rinse hands.
- **Do not** use a shared hand towel. Always use disposable towels in day care or food preparation settings.
- **Do not** use sponges or nondisposable cleaning cloths unless you launder them on a regular basis, adding chlorine bleach to the wash water. Remember that germs thrive on moist surfaces!

What are some ways to help children with good handwashing technique?

It is important to encourage and help children wash hands before eating, after playing outdoors, after playing with pets, after using the bathroom, and after blowing their noses. Even though hands appear clean, they may carry germs or microorganisms capable of causing disease.

Do not assume that children know how to wash their hands properly. Supervision, especially in a day care setting, is an essential element in forming good handwashing habits in children.

Finally, children learn by example! Let them observe good handwashing technique from the adults who care for them.

May I use over-the-counter alcohol gels for washing my hands instead of soap and water?

These products, which can be found wherever soap is sold, are very effective at killing most germs on the hands as long as your hands are not visibly dirty. They should be used when soap and water are not readily available.

To use these alcohol gels correctly, apply about a teaspoonful on the palm of one hand. Then rub the gel all over both hands, making sure you rub the front, back, and fingernail areas of both hands. Let the alcohol dry, which should take about 30 seconds.

If your hands look dirty but you have no other way to wash your hands, use the gel but wash with soap and water as soon as you can.

Handwashing signs are available on the **DHS.wisconsin.gov** website for general use and for food establishments. Check the website for the most current sign.