The Benefits of Hand Washing

By LifeLong Health StaffCA On Tuesday 664 1

Regular hand washing is important to your health year-round because it can keep you from getting sick or from spreading germs to friends, family or even an entire community.

Hand washing is especially important during the stretch between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve. That’s because the holidays coincide with the height of the cold and flu season as people congregate in close quarters and out-of-town guests can come bearing new strains of bacteria, viruses and other microbes along with their big boxes of presents.

Numerous illnesses can be spread by people who neglect basic hand hygiene, either through hand-to-hand contact or by leaving germs on commonly used surfaces. So it’s essential to regularly wash your hands with soap and running water or use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol.

Your Mom was correct. You should always wash your hands before eating food. You also should always wash your hands:

- Before, during, and after preparing food.
- After using the toilet.
- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet.
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick.
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- After touching an animal or animal waste.
- After touching garbage.
- Before and after treating a cut or wound.
- Before giving medicine.

Unfortunately, too many of us either ignore these basic precautions or wash in such a perfunctory manner that we walk away from the sink with our hands still crawling with germs.

Although not even the most thorough hand washing can remove every germ, appropriate hand washing can remove most of them. Here’s how to correctly wash your hands:

- Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold) and apply soap.
- Rub your palms together to make a lather and scrub them well.
- Scrub the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
- Continue rubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds. How long is that? If you can’t keep your eye on a watch, just hum “The Happy Birthday Song” twice from beginning to end.
- Rinse your hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.

Soap and running water are the best ways to remove germs. But if they’re not available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer is a good alternative even though it can’t eliminate all types of germs and is ineffective when hands are visibly dirty.

To correctly use a hand sanitizer:

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

Quick Quiz: True or False

- Antibacterial soap is more effective at killing germs than regular soap.
- Using a towel to turn off the faucet can prevent the spread of germs.
- Antibacterial wipes or towelettes kill as many germs as alcohol-based sanitizers.
- You can safely touch people or surfaces before your hands are completely dry.
- Children in care settings need to wash their hands at least several times per day, not just before meals.

Answers

**False.** Research shows that regular liquid, bar, or powder soap is just as effective.

**True.** This last little step can minimize exposure to another common source of germs, especially in public restrooms.

**False.** Although antibacterial wipes or towelettes are better than nothing, alcohol-based sanitizers are significantly more lethal to germs.

**False.** Moist hands are a germ-friendly environment.

**True.** Children cared for in groups outside the home are at high risk of respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses which they can spread to family members and others.