Indiana State Department of Health
Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Hand washing

Why is hand washing important?

Hand washing is the single most effective means of preventing the spread of germs and infectious diseases. Many illnesses, such as the common cold, influenza (flu), ear infections, strep throat, diarrhea, and other intestinal infections, can be spread by unwashed or improperly washed hands. You should clean your hands often and request that others do the same.

How are diseases spread?

Germs that cause illness can get on your hands in many ways, such as handling food or animals, shaking hands, using the toilet, and touching shared objects - doorknobs, elevator buttons, grocery carts, telephones or computer keyboards. You can reduce the spread of many germs by properly washing your hands with soap and water.

When should I wash my hands?

Always wash your hands:
- After using the toilet
- After helping someone else use the toilet
- After changing a diaper
- After helping someone who is ill
- After blowing your nose, sneezing, or coughing
- Before, during, and after food preparation, especially raw foods
- Before and after eating
- After handling soiled utensils and equipment
- After handling garbage
- After handling money
- After handling animals or animal waste, especially reptiles, (e.g., iguanas, turtles, or snakes) or livestock (e.g., cattle, pigs, or sheep)

Always wash your hands before you touch your eyes, nose, mouth, or ears.

How do I properly wash my hands?

- Wet hands with running water and apply soap
- Rub hands together to make a lather
- Scrub the palms, back of hands, each thumb, between fingers, under fingernails, for at least 15 seconds (about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice)
- Rinse hands well under running water
- Pat hands dry beginning at the wrist and moving downward with clean towel, paper towel, or air drier
- Turn off water by using your paper towel

How can hand washing protect me and my family?

Keeping your hands clean is one of the most important ways you can avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. Germs that cause colds, eye infections, and other illnesses can spread to the hands by sneezing, coughing, or rubbing the eyes and then can be transferred to others. A large percentage of foodborne disease outbreaks are spread by contaminated hands. Many diarrheal illnesses, such as Salmonellosis, hepatitis A, and Shigellosis can be spread from person to person when someone does not wash their hands after using the toilet and then passes germs by handling food, shaking hands, or touching other objects. If the germs get into another person's mouth then that person becomes sick. Proper hand washing is everyone's responsibility:
- Parents should teach their children the proper way to wash their hands.
- Children should see their parents and other care providers washing their hands properly and frequently.
- Consumers need to inform restaurants, daycare facilities, health care providers, hospitals, and nursing homes they are concerned about personal hygiene and the proper use of hand washing to help control infections.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Handwashing: Clean Hands Save Lives
http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/

Henry the Helping Hand
http://www.henrythehand.com/

Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH)
Handwashing Campaign
http://www.in.gov/isdh/24036.htm

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