

Wash your hands

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"Wash your hands!" How many times have you heard that from your parents? You might think they're just nagging you, but actually the most important thing you can do to keep from getting sick is to wash your hands.



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), if you don't wash your hands frequently, you can pick up germs from other sources and then infect yourself. You're at risk every time you touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. In fact, one of the most common ways people catch colds is by rubbing their nose or their eyes after the cold virus has gotten on their hands.

If people don't wash their hands frequently (especially when they're sick), they can spread germs directly to other people or onto surfaces that others touch. And before you know it, everyone around you is coming down with something!

The First Line of Defense Against Germs

Think about all of the things that you touched today - from the telephone to the toilet. Maybe you blew your nose and played with your dog. Whatever you did, you came into contact with germs. So it's easy for germs on your hand to end up in your mouth (maybe when you scarfed that handful of popcorn with your teammates right after soccer practice).

By frequently washing your hands the right way, you'll wash away germs - such as bacteria and viruses - that you have picked up from other people, through contaminated water and food, from tainted surfaces, or from animals and animal waste.

Defensive Hand Washing

Did you know that an estimated 1 out of 5 people don't wash their hands after using the restroom? In 2005 the American Society for Microbiology did a survey of hand washing. They asked people questions about their hand-washing habits and also watched people in public restrooms. The results were kind of gross. For example:

- People don't always wash their hands after using the bathroom - 91% of adults say they always wash their hands after using public restrooms, but just 83% were seen doing so.
- People wash their hands less at home - 83% say they wash their hands after using the bathroom at home. Germs are germs, and a bathroom is a bathroom.
- Only 32% of people in the survey said they wash their hands after coughing or sneezing. So it's nice that you protect the people around you by covering your mouth with your hand when you cough. But if you then reach for your friend's pizza, you might as well not have bothered.
- Just 21% wash their hands after handling money.
- Only 42% of the people in the survey washed up after petting a dog or cat. You've seen your dog roll in that mystery smell in the park or your cat rub against you after using the litter pan. Fido and Fluffy are dirtier than you think.

And even if you're a good hand-washer, your friends may be harboring some dirty little secrets: Students don't wash their hands often or well. In one study, only 58% of female and 48% of male middle- and high-school students washed their hands after using the bathroom. Yuck!

How to Wash Your Hands Correctly

There's a right way to wash your hands. A splash of water and a drop or two of soap won't do the trick. Follow these simple steps to keep your hands clean:

- Use warm water (not cold or hot).
- Use whatever soap you like. Antibacterial soaps are popular but regular soap works fine. If you suspect that your hands have come into contact with someone with an infection, think about using an alcohol hand sanitizer.
- Rub your hands together vigorously and scrub all surfaces: Lather up on both sides of your hands, your wrists, between your fingers, and around your nails. Wash for 15 seconds - about how long it takes to sing "Happy Birthday."
- Rinse well under warm running water and pat dry with a clean towel.
- In public restrooms, consider using a paper towel to flush the toilet and open the door because toilet and door handles harbor germs. Throw the towel away after you leave.

To prevent chapping or dry skin, use a mild soap with warm water, pat rather than rub hands dry, and apply a moisturizing lotion liberally afterwards.

When there is no soap or water available, waterless hand soaps or scrubs are a good alternative. They're usually available as a liquid, wipes, or towelettes, and often come in small travel sizes that are perfect for keeping in your book bag, car, locker, purse, or sports bag.