



Hand Washing: A Powerful Antidote to Illness

How many times have you and your child washed your hands today?

You might not have given it much thought. It's either part of your routine, done frequently without thinking, or maybe you don't do it much at all. But as your pediatrician may have told you, hand washing may be the single most important act you and your child have for disease prevention (</English/health-issues/conditions/prevention/Pages/default.aspx>).

Making It Habit

As early as possible, get your child into the habit of washing her hands often and thoroughly. All day long, your child is exposed to bacteria and viruses—when touching a playmate, sharing toys, or petting the cat. Once her hands pick up these germs (</English/health-issues/conditions/prevention/Pages/Germ-Prevention-Strategies.aspx>), she can quickly infect herself by:

- Rubbing her eyes
- Touching her nose
- Placing her fingers in her mouth.

The whole process can happen in seconds, and cause an infection that can last for days, weeks, or even longer.

When To Wash

Hand washing can stop the spread of infection. The key is to encourage your child to wash her hands throughout the day. For example, help her or remind her to wash her hands:

- Before eating (including snacks)
- After a trip to the bathroom (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Bathroom-Safety.aspx>)
- Whenever she comes in from playing outdoors (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Backyard-Safety.aspx>)
- After touching an animal like a family pet (</English/health-issues/conditions/from-insects-animals/Pages/Pets-and-Pasteurella-Infections.aspx>)
- After sneezing or coughing (</English/health-issues/conditions/ear-nose-throat/Pages/Coughs-and-Colds-Medicines-or-Home-Remedies.aspx>) if she covers her mouth
- When someone in the household is ill

Studies on hand washing in public restrooms (</English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Using-a-Public-Bathroom.aspx>) show that most people don't have very good hygiene habits. "Hand washing" may mean just a quick splash of water and perhaps a squirt of soap, but not nearly enough to get their hands clean.

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Steps to Proper Hand Washing

So what does a thorough hand washing involve? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following steps:

- Wet your child's hands.
- Apply clean bar soap or liquid soap to the hands, and then place the bar on a rack where it can drain before the next hand washing.
- Rub the hands vigorously together. Scrub every surface completely.
- Keep rubbing and scrubbing for 10 to 15 seconds to effectively remove the germs.
- Rinse the hands completely, then dry them.

About Antibacterial Soaps

Drugstore shelves are full of trendy antibacterial soaps, but studies have shown that these antibacterial products are no better at washing away dirt and germs than regular soap. Some infectious disease experts have even suggested that by using antibacterial soaps, you may actually kill off normal bacteria and increase the chances that resistant bacteria may grow.

The best solution is to wash your child's hands with warm water and ordinary soap that does not contain antibacterial substances (eg, triclosan). Regular use of soap and water is better than using waterless (and often alcohol-based) soaps, gels, rinses, and hand rubs when your child's hands are visibly dirty (and with children, there usually is dirt on the hands!). However, when there is no sink available (eg, the car), hand rubs can be a useful alternative.

How Long to Wash

Keep in mind that although 10 to 15 seconds of hand washing sounds like an instant, it is much longer than you think. Time yourself the next time you wash your hands. Watch your child while she's washing her hands to make sure she's developing good hygiene behaviors. Pick a song that lasts for 15 seconds and sing it while you wash. Encourage your child to wash her hands not only at home, but also at school, at friends' homes, and everywhere else. It's an important habit for her to get into, and hopefully one that's hard to break!

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