



# IT'S YOUR HEALTH

*This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.*

## The Benefits of Hand Washing

### The Issue

Washing your hands correctly (or using an alcohol-based hand rub) is the most effective thing you can do to protect yourself against a number of infectious diseases, such as influenza (the "flu") and the common cold. Not only will it help keep you healthy, it will help prevent the spread of infectious diseases to others.

### Background

Even if your hands appear to be clean, they may carry germs. Hands pick up microorganisms (germs) in a number of ways.

When people who are sick sneeze or cough, the germs that are making them sick are expelled into the air in tiny droplets. If these droplets get onto your hands, and then you touch your mouth, eyes or nose without washing away the germs, you carry the infection. You can also get sick if you don't wash your hands before and after preparing food, after handling raw meat, and after using the toilet.

Washing your hands not only prevents you from getting sick, but it also reduces the risk of infecting others. If you don't wash your hands properly before coming into contact with others, you can infect them with the germs on your hands. Other people can also get sick from the germs unwashed hands leave on shared objects like doorknobs, keyboards, and other equipment in the home or workplace.

### How Hand Washing Reduces Health Risks

Hand-to-hand contact can spread mild conditions, such as the common cold, but also more severe or life-threatening diseases. Infectious diseases are a particular risk to the very young, the elderly, those with a pre-existing disease, and people with a compromised immune system, such as those with HIV or AIDS.

### Proper Methods of Hand Washing

Although hand washing might seem like a simple task, you should follow these steps to thoroughly rid your hands of germs.

#### Using Soap

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Alcohol-based hand cleansers are useful when soap and water are not available. In most cases antibacterial soap is not necessary for safe, effective hand hygiene.
- Remove any hand or arm jewellery you may be wearing and wet your hands with warm water.
- Add regular soap and rub your hands together, ensuring you have lathered all surfaces for at least 15 seconds. How long is 15 seconds? The length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday.
- Wash the front and back of your hands, as well as between your fingers and under your nails.



- Rinse your hands well under warm running water, using a rubbing motion.
- Wipe and dry your hands gently with a paper towel or a clean towel. Drying them vigorously can damage the skin.
- Turn off the tap using the paper towel so that you do not re-contaminate your hands. When using a public bathroom, use the same paper towel to open the door when you leave.
- If skin dryness is a problem, use a moisturizing lotion.

If you have sensitive skin or are in a position where you must wash your hands constantly (as a healthcare worker must), you might want to use an alcohol-based hand rub instead.

#### Using Alcohol-based Hand Rubs

- An alcohol-based hand rub can be used if soap and water are not available.
- If your hands are visibly soiled, it is best to use soap and water. If it's not possible to wash with soap and water, use towelettes to remove the soil, then use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Use hand rubs according to the manufacturer's instructions. Make sure your hands are dry, as wet hands will dilute the product.
- Use enough product to cover all the surfaces of your hands and fingers.
- Rub your hands together until the product has evaporated. If dry skin is a problem, use a moisturizing lotion.

### Minimizing Your Risk

Here are further steps you can take to protect yourself and your family.

- Wash your hands often, especially after coughing, sneezing or using

tissues, before and after eating, before preparing food, after handling raw meat, after petting an animal, and after using the bathroom.

- When you cough or sneeze, use a tissue or raise your arm up to your face and aim for your sleeve. Do not sneeze into your hand. Throw away tissues as soon as you use them
- Keep the surface areas in your home and office free of germs by cleaning them. Doorknobs, light switches, telephones, and keyboards are especially important to keep clean.
- If you have children, teach them good hygiene and how to wash their hands properly. Young children should be supervised while washing their hands.
- If you use bar soap, keep it in a self-draining holder that can be cleaned thoroughly before a new bar is added.
- Don't use a single damp cloth to wash a group of children's hands.
- Don't use a standing basin of water to rinse your hands.
- Don't use a common hand towel.
- Don't use sponges or non-disposable cleaning cloths unless you change them daily and launder them using detergent. Germs thrive on moist surfaces.

### Government of Canada's Role

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) publishes infection control guidelines for use by the provinces, territories, and healthcare organizations.

Working with the provinces and territorial governments, non-governmental organizations and health care providers, PHAC develops evidence-based national standards and policies, promotes the exchange of information, and engages in disease prevention and promotion activities.

### Need More Info?

For more information visit the following Web sites:

- Public Health Agency of Canada, **Get the Dirt on clean hands:** [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/iif-vcg/wh-lm-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/iif-vcg/wh-lm-eng.php)
- **Community and Hospital Infection Control Association Canada (CHICA-Canada)** [www.chica.org/links\\_handhygiene.html](http://www.chica.org/links_handhygiene.html)
- **Canadian Patient Safety Institute** [www.handhygiene.ca/](http://www.handhygiene.ca/)
- World Health Organization, **Global Hand Washing Day:** [www.who.int/gpsc/events/2008/15\\_10\\_08/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/gpsc/events/2008/15_10_08/en/index.html)
- **Handwashing for parents and kids** [www.caringforkids.cps.ca/healthybodies/Handwashing.htm](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/healthybodies/Handwashing.htm)
- For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the **It's Your Health** Web section at: [www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh)

You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245\*

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