

PROPER TECHNIQUES FOR HAND WASHING

It seems you cannot turn on the television or read the newspaper without learning about another public health threat resulting from an infectious outbreak. One simple step -- hand washing -- can go a long way toward reducing the spread of germs in health care environments, but it is important to know when and how to properly do it.

When removing soils or transient microorganisms, plain soap or detergent is recommended by the *Association of Professionals In Infection Control and Epidemiology* (APIC). First, hands should be wet with running water. Next, a hand washing agent should be applied and thoroughly distributed over hands. Then hands should be vigorously rubbed together for 10-15 seconds, making sure to generate friction on all surfaces of the hands and fingers. Hands should be thoroughly rinsed to remove residual soap and then dried.

While plain soap removes transient bacteria from the skin, it does not kill the bacteria released by shedding of skin cells or promote their dispersal. Published studies indicate that antimicrobials increase the likelihood of killing potentially pathogenic bacteria. In addition, certain antimicrobials offer more persistent activity on the skin than plain soap. This can be desirable in environments where gloves are worn, when it is not possible to wash the hands during procedures, or when continued chemical activity on the skin is advantageous.

Industry practice suggests that antimicrobials should be used in more critical health care settings by nurse practitioners and other medical personnel

during the performance of invasive procedures such as the placement and care of intravascular catheters, indwelling urinary catheters, or other invasive devices. Antimicrobials should also be used in other situations in which a maximum bacterial count reduction is needed, such as during surgery or before contact with patients who have immune defects, damage to intact skin (burns, pressure ulcers or wounds), and in caring for very elderly patients. In these instances, hand washing with a plain cleanser may fail to remove all transient microorganisms especially when contamination is heavy in these high-risk situations.

Overall, the frequency and amount of time spent during each hand washing session combined with the use of a quality product is paramount to ensuring proper hygiene and sanitation.

###

Sidebar #1

Proper Hand Washing Techniques:

1. Wet the hands and forearms using running water.
 - Excessively hot water is harder on the skin, dries the skin and is too uncomfortable to wash with for the recommended amount of time.
 - Cold water prevents proper lathering of the soap and soil and germs may not be washed away.
2. Apply cleanser.
 - Dispensers should be used to deliver the proper amount of cleanser while protecting the remaining product from contamination.
 - Use a product designed for your cleaning task — general purpose or antimicrobial skin cleansing.
 - Read directions for proper dispensing amounts.
3. Thoroughly distribute and lather over hands.
 - Scrub the hands and forearms well, for at least 15 seconds, and use a nail brush if necessary. Repeat until the skin is thoroughly clean.
4. Rinse thoroughly. Dry the hands completely.
 - Leaving soap residue on the skin and incomplete drying can contribute to dermatitis.
5. Use a paper towel to turn off the faucet to prevent re-contaminating clean hands.
6. Use a hand lotion after washing to ease dryness from frequent handwashing.
 - Hand cream helps restore the skin's natural oils that keep it resilient. Skin conditioning agents (emollients) soften and smooth skin, and moisturizers reduce the shedding of dry skin flakes and microorganisms.

Other tips to ensure cross-contamination is minimized:

- Rinse the hands with running water with the hands pointed downward to avoid contaminated water running up the forearm.
- Avoid long nails, nail polish and jewelry, which harbor microorganisms. Remove jewelry prior to washing.
- Do not use gloves in place of hand washing — gloves are also subject to contamination.
- Always wash hands after removing gloves. The moisture that builds up under gloves can encourage the growth of microorganisms.
- Examine your skin daily for cracks and lesions.
- Do not touch anything before returning to work.

###

Sidebar #2

Keeping Germs in Check . . . Hand Washing Tips For Nurse Practitioners To Share With Patients

- **Wash hands frequently**, especially after using the restroom, blowing your nose, sneezing, coughing, holding a child's hand, caring for an ill person, using an ATM or a public phone or handling money. Also wash before and after handling food or eating, putting in contact lenses, and after playing with a pet, handling garbage or changing a diaper.
- **Use soap with warm water**, scrub under fingernails, between fingers, palms, wrists, and tops of hands for about a minute. With water still running, dry hands with a paper towel. Avoid touching the lever of a paper towel dispenser if it has one. Turn off the faucet with a dry area of the paper towel.
- **Avoid touching door handles.**
- **Use liners and disposable wipes** in public bathroom diaper-changing areas as these areas can be bacteria-laden.

###