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Healthy Insights

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Handwashing

Do you know the easiest and most effective way to avoid getting sick? Wash your hands!

Germs are tiny organisms (living things) invisible to the naked eye that can cause disease. There are many different types of germs. Bacteria, viruses, fungi, and protozoa are the four major types.

Germs are everywhere, especially on your hands; and they can make you sick. Regular hand washing, especially before and after certain activities, is one of the best ways to remove germs, avoid getting sick, and prevent the spread of germs to others.

There are two ways to clean your hands. The first is by using soap and water and the second is by using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Be aware that hand sanitizers don't kill ALL types of germs and may not remove harmful chemicals like pesticides and heavy metals (such as lead).

Washing your hands reduces the amount of any types of germs, pesticides, and metals on your hands. The key to successful hand-washing is to know when to do it and which method to use to prevent you (and others) from getting sick!



When should you wash your hands?

If available, use soap and clean water to wash your hands in the following instances:

- Before, during, and after preparing food;
- Before eating food;
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick;
- Before and after treating a cut or wound;
- After using the bathroom, changing diapers, or cleaning up a child who has used the bathroom;
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing;
- After touching an animal, animal food or treats, animal cages, or animal waste;
- After touching garbage; and
- If your hands are visibly dirty or greasy.

How to properly wash your hands

1. **Wet** your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), turn off the tap, and apply soap.
2. **Lather** your hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Be sure to lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
3. **Scrub** your hands for at least 20 seconds. *Need a timer? Hum the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice.*
4. **Rinse** hands well under clean, running water.
5. **Dry** hands using a clean towel or air-dry them.

If soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (see below), and wash with soap and water as soon as you can.

How to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer

Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Supervise young children when they use hand sanitizer to prevent them from swallowing alcohol, especially in schools and childcare facilities.

1. **Apply.** Put enough product on hands to cover all surfaces.
2. **Rub hands together** until hands feel dry. This should take around 20 seconds.

Avoid rinsing or wiping off the hand sanitizer before it's dry, as it may not work as well against germs.



Do NOT use hand sanitizer if your hands are visibly dirty or greasy—for example, after gardening, playing outdoors, or after fishing or camping. Unless a handwashing station is not available, wash your hands with soap and water instead.

Adapted from <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf>

For more information, please visit the CDC handwashing website:
<http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing>

IPRO Healthy Insights is authored by Dr. Clare Bradley, IPRO's Senior Vice President/Chief Medical Officer, and a nationally recognized public health advocate.

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