

Want to prevent illness and disease? Wash your hands!



The numbers are in, and the Great Minnesota Get-Together, also known as the Minnesota State Fair, had a record number of attendees this year – just over two million people! In fact, I was one of them; I attended the fair this last weekend.

While there, I noticed how many surfaces we constantly touch: handles, railings, knobs and, of course, money. I also noticed how few people bothered to wash their hands when I used one of the restrooms. This got me thinking: How do we best protect ourselves from all the germs and illness around us? The answer is simple – good, old-fashioned handwashing. I thought it would be good to re-visit a “Doctor’s Advice” column from last year on the subject.

We have all seen it. At a public restroom a person bolts out without washing their hands, or just as bad, splashes water on their hands for three seconds and barely grabs a paper towel before bolting out the door. Both of these are woefully inadequate.

Of all the things you can do to prevent illness and the spread of disease, proper handwashing may be the easiest and most effective. Repeated handwashing is the best way to prevent getting sick and to prevent spreading disease. Hand cleansing can be done with soap and water or with an alcohol-containing hand sanitizer.

Here are simple guidelines to properly wash your hands. Talk to your children, friends and family members and make sure they get into the good hand-washing habit, too.

When and why should we wash our hands?

Throughout the day our hands come into contact with a variety of things such as people, phones, handrails, door handles, toys, keyboards, steering wheels, pets and other dirty surfaces that can harbor germs such as bacteria, viruses and other microbes.

Handwashing is especially important after going to the bathroom. By then touching our eyes, nose and mouth, as we all do dozens of times during the day, we can infect ourselves with the germs on our hands. It is not possible nor realistic to keep our hands completely sanitized. The goal is to wash our hands properly and frequently to minimize the spread of germs and disease.

The most important factor in proper handwashing is washing the hands with lathered soap for a minimum of a full 20 seconds.

Always wash your hands before:

- Preparing food
- Eating food
- Touching contact lenses
- Caring for a sick person
- Caring for the wounds of an injured person
- Taking or giving medicine
- Touching or putting your hands or fingers in your mouth, eyes or nose

Always wash your hands after:

- Handling any raw food, especially meats

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- Going to the bathroom
- Changing diapers
- Nose blowing
- Coughing or sneezing, especially into hands
- Petting animals
- Handling pet toys or pet waste
- Changing the dressing on wounds
- Caring for a sick person
- Handling waste or garbage
- Handling garden or household chemicals
- Touching dirty shoes
- Shaking hands with people
- Touching anything that could be contaminated with germs
- Whenever your hands look or are dirty

Handwashing best practices

It is generally best to wash your hands with soap and water. Follow these simple steps:

- Use running water, not a basin filled with water.
- Either cold or warm water will work.
- First, thoroughly wet your hands.
- Apply a liberal amount of soap to wet hands. All soaps work well.
- Rub hands together vigorously and well to produce a good lather.
- Be sure to completely wash your palms, wrists, back of hands, between fingers, and under fingernails if needed.
- Rub your hands aggressively for at least 20 seconds, or the time it takes to count silently to 20-banana (i.e. one-banana, two-banana, three-banana... to 20-banana). The length of handwashing is the most important factor in proper handwashing and cannot be shortened.
- Rinse well for at least a seven-banana count.
- Use a clean paper towel, clean cloth towel or air dryer to dry your hands completely.
- Turn the faucet off with a paper towel or elbow. Do not touch the faucet to avoid re-contaminating your clean hands.
- As you are leaving a lavatory, do not touch the door knob. Once again, use a paper towel to open the door to avoid contaminating your clean hands by touching the knob.
- In the winter, consider applying a good moisturizer to keep the hands from becoming irritated and chapped.

Alcohol hand sanitizers can be used

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can work acceptably when soap and water are not available. It is important to make sure the sanitizer has an alcohol content of at least 60 percent. Be sure to cover your hands completely with the sanitizer. Rub well until hands are dry.

Teach children good handwashing habits, too

It is so important to teach children the proper way to wash hands to maintain good health. Encourage them to wash their hands frequently and especially before all meals, after all toilet use, and whenever their hands appear dirty.

Show them exactly how to wash their hands and review their hand-washing performance on a regular basis to make sure they are not “backsliding.” If they are too short to reach a sink, make sure to have a children’s step-stool available for them.

Remember to have them count to 20-banana to make sure they are investing enough time to clean their hands properly. Hand sanitizers, as mentioned above, can be used when water is not available. There is also an excellent hand-washing instructional video listed at the end of this article to review personally and with family members.

A great way to stay healthy

Proper handwashing is the best way to prevent illness and disease. The key is to wash hands correctly. That means using soap and water when possible, lathering well, and doing it at least for 20 seconds.

Watch the hand-washing video, teach your children proper techniques, and insist they always wash their hands. Proper handwashing may be the very best thing you do for their good health and your own.

For an excellent video on proper handwashing techniques produced by the Centers for Disease Control, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhmYLwDdPuE.

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