Hand washing: Help stop the spread of germs

Wash your hands often to keep yourself and others healthy. Hand washing is the most important thing you can do to help stop the spread of germs that cause illnesses such as colds, the flu, diarrhea, or vomiting.

Why is hand washing important?

Washing your hands and your child's hands is the best way to stop the spread of germs. When you wash your hands, you clean them and remove the germs that can cause illness.

We can pick up germs on our hands from touching people or things around us. Raw foods, animals, and many objects in our daily lives carry germs. Wiping your nose or your child's nose or changing a diaper is a common way to get germs on your hands. You cannot avoid contacting germs, but you can reduce the chance of infecting yourself and others by washing your hands.

How do I properly wash my hands?

To properly wash your hands, or your child's hands, follow the steps below:

1. Remove rings or other jewelry on your hands and wrists
2. Wet your hands with running water
3. Wash all parts of your hands with plain soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and rub hands together to create lather (to help children wash their hands long enough, sing the ABC song)
4. Rinse hands well under running water
5. Dry hands with a clean cloth or paper towel
6. Use the towel to turn off the tap and open the door when you leave if you are in a public restroom

If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. After applying the gel or foam, rub your hands together until they are dry. This is an easy way to clean your hands as long as they are not visibly dirty. Keep sanitizers out of the reach of children because they may be harmful if swallowed.

How should I wash my baby's hands?

To properly wash your baby's hands, follow the steps below:

1. Wash with plain soap and a wet, fresh towel (either cloth or paper)
2. Rinse well with another fresh, wet towel
3. Dry well

When should I wash my hands?

Wash your hands when they are visibly soiled and before touching your eyes, nose, mouth or face. You should also wash your hands before or after you take part in activities that increase your risk of contacting or spreading germs.

Wash your hands before you:

- Prepare or eat food
- Feed a baby or child, including breastfeeding
- Give anyone medicine
- Change a diaper
- Floss your teeth
- Insert or remove contact lenses
- Take care of anyone who is sick

Wash your hands after you:

- Change a diaper
- Take care of anyone who is sick

- Wipe your child's nose or blow your nose
- Use the toilet or help a child use the toilet
- Handle raw food such as meats or poultry
- Touch pets or animals
- Clean pet or animal cages or litter boxes
- Clean around the house
- Handle garbage

When should children wash their hands?

Children should always wash their hands before they eat or handle food.

Children should wash their hands after they:

- Use the toilet
- Wipe or blow their nose
- Cough or sneeze into their hands
- Play outdoors
- Play with pets or animals
- Attend school or daycare

It is important to help young children wash their hands to make sure it is done well, and to help them learn how to do it correctly.

How can I avoid spreading germs to others when washing?

To help reduce the spread of germs to others when washing:

- Each child should have their own labeled clean cloth to wipe their hands and face
- Use fresh running water to wash and rinse hands, do not use a standing basin of water
- If you use bar soap, keep it dry in a self-draining holder

Source: Canadian Paediatric Society
https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/healthy-living/handwashing

Adapted with permission.