

Handwashing: The Key to Winter Health

According to the July, 2005 medical journal *Lancet*, more than 3.5 million children, age 5 years and under, die from diarrhea and respiratory-tract infections every year. In the study, researchers examined the effect of a neighborhood handwashing promotion, in Karachi, Pakistan, to reduce these numbers. Fieldworkers visited households weekly for 1 year to encourage handwashing by residents and to record symptoms in all households. The results were amazing. Children younger than 5 years in households that received plain soap and handwashing promotion had a 50% lower incidence of pneumonia than the control households (no handwashing promotion). Also compared with controls, children younger than 15 years in households with plain soap handwashing had a 53% lower incidence of diarrhea and a 34% lower incidence of impetigo. Imagine the results if *everyone* washed their hands more often!

Other Great Reasons to Promote Regular Handwashing

Even with the proven benefits to regular handwashing, around 20% of Americans do not wash their hands after using the toilet (even though only about half of these people admit to it in studies). Regular handwashing can prevent not only the common cold, but even more serious illnesses such as meningitis, bronchiolitis, influenza, hepatitis A and most types of gastrointestinal disorders and staph infections. Poor handwashing habits when handling and preparing food can also lead to illnesses such as salmonella and E. coli.

Additionally, Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and other staph infections can spread quickly in schools, especially in locker rooms during physical education classes and from contact during sports practices and games. MRSA used to only be found in hospitals, but it is now appearing in other areas, such as locker room. A seventeen year-old football player from Virginia died in October due to MRSA and numerous other youths, particularly (but not confined to) athletes, have contracted the infection as well. Handwashing is a great way to reduce the risk of contracting these infections because the hands often bring the germs to the mouth, eyes, nose and open areas of the skin like cuts, sores, and scratches. The issue is serious enough that the Pocatello/Chubbuck school district recently sent a letter to parents and guardians about how to prevent staph infections. The letter is very informative and I encourage everyone to read it and heed the advice.

Tips for Proper Handwashing

All persons should wash their hands before and after eating, before, during and after preparing food, after touching bodily fluids (including nasal secretions and after coughing and sneezing into a hand), after using the bathroom, when hands are visibly dirty, after helping or being around someone who is sick and after handling animals. The proper method is as follows:

- Wet hands with warm water.
- Apply soap.
- Rub hands to make a lather and continue for twenty seconds (about the time it takes to sing the alphabet song).
- Rinse away all soap with running water.
- Dry hands with a paper towel.
- Turn off faucet and open doors with a paper towel, especially in public places.

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