Personal Hygiene

Keeping clean is essential for good health. Poor hygiene can lead to bacterial or parasitic infections and may cause skin diseases or other illnesses that affect your well-being.

Washing hands well with soap and clean water helps remove up to 99% of bacteria that can lead to the spread of a number of diseases and conditions. An alcohol-based product containing at least 60% alcohol can be used to clean hands when soap and clean water are not available. Keeping fingernails trimmed and clean also contribute to good hand hygiene.

Why is hand washing with soap so important?

- It helps prevent typhoid, cholera, shigella and many other common gastro-enteric infections. Human faeces are the main sources of diarrhoeal infections which claim the lives of 1.87 million children under the age of 5 each year according to the World Health Organization. Research shows that children exposed to hand washing promotion and soap experience 30-50% less diarrhoeal rates compared to children who do not (Fewtrell et al., 2005).

- It helps prevent respiratory infections such as influenza (flu), pneumonia, SARS (Sudden Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome) and avian flu. Respiratory tract infection rates can cut by 21-45% (Curtis and Cairncross, 2003).

- It helps prevent skin and eye infections such as impetigo and trachoma, a bacterial eye infection. A study in Pakistan found that hand washing with soap reduced impetigo rates by 34% in children under the age of 5.

- It helps to lower the incidence of infections caused by intestinal worms such as roundworm (ascariasis) and whipworm (trichuriasis).

- It is a very cost-effective way of preventing ill-health.

- It is the single most cost-effective way of significantly reducing Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) related to diarrhoeal diseases. DALYs are used to measure the burden of disease and the effectiveness of health interventions by combining information on the “years of life lost” and the “years lived with disability”.

- It stops children from missing out on their education. Diarrhoeal diseases force children to miss out on millions of school days each year.

- It increases productivity as people are healthier and take less time off work.

When should I wash my hands with soap?

Wash your hands with soap and clean running water if available:

- Before, during and after preparing food.
- Before eating or feeding a child.
- Before and after treating a cut or wound.
• Before and after tending to someone who is sick.

• Before and after putting in or taking out contact lenses.

• Before any activity that involves putting your fingers in or near your mouth, eyes, etc.

• After using the toilet, changing a child’s nappy or helping to clean a child after they have used the toilet.

• After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing.

• After handling uncooked foods, especially raw meat.

• After handling rubbish.

• After playing with or touching a pet or animal.

• After playing or spending time outside.

**How do you wash your hands ‘properly’?**

Effective hand washing requires soap and a small amount of clean water. Wet your hands with clean, running water (cold or warm), apply soap and make a lather. You should ideally scrub the palms and backs of your hands, between your fingers and under your nails for about 30 seconds. An easy method to gauge 30 seconds is to find a popular children’s song that takes about that long to sing. In English it takes about 30 seconds to sing “Happy Birthday” twice through. You don’t need to sing out loud!

Rinse your hands well under running water and then dry your hands on a clean towel, a paper towel or let your hands air dry.

**How do I keep my hands clean when soap and clean water are scarce?**

You can use an alcohol-based product which contains at least 60% alcohol to clean your hands. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can reduce some but not all germs. In addition, alcohol hand rubs are not as effective when hands are visibly dirty or you have diarrhoea as it will not remove certain viruses that can cause diarrhoea. Soap and water is more effective in this case.

**Children and hand washing**

Involving children in washing hands can be great fun and enables both adults and children to take an active role in managing their own health. From a young age, children can be taught how to wash their hands properly and they can encourage others, including adults and other children, to learn good hand washing techniques.

As a parent you can help your family’s health by:

• Teaching all family members good hand washing techniques.

• Reminding your children to wash their hands.

• Washing your own hands with your children.
What about nail hygiene?

Fingernails can harbour dirt and germs and may therefore contribute to the spread of infections such as pinworms.

Top tips for maintaining good nail hygiene include:

- Keep fingernails trimmed short.
- Scrub the underside of nails with soap and water by using a nail brush.
- Avoid biting your nails.
- Avoid cutting cuticles as they help prevent infections.
- Nail clippers and nail files should be properly cleaned, especially if they are shared with others.
- Chipped nail polish and nail extensions can harbour more germs than those without.

What about dental hygiene?

Cleaning teeth regularly by using a toothbrush, toothpaste and safe water will help avoid dental treatment such as fillings and the permanent removal of teeth.

What about body and hair washing

Washing your body and hair regularly with soap and running water (if available) can help prevent infections. Diseases such as trachoma, a bacterial eye infection, can be prevented through regular face washing using soap and water alongside improved sanitation to reduce the breeding sites of flies which transmit the disease.

People who suffer from lymphatic filariasis, a parasite that gets into the human body via a mosquito bite, can prevent secondary bacterial and fungal infections and decrease the likelihood of lymphoedema developing into elephantiasis. This can be achieved by using soap and water to wash the swollen areas (usually limbs) everyday whilst also disinfecting wounds with antibacterial or antifungal cream.

Hand washing before, during and after a disaster

Access to clean and safe running water is likely to be more difficult during and after a disaster such as a tropical storm, earthquake or flood. However, keeping your hands clean will help you avoid illness.

During an emergency, try to keep your hands clean to help prevent the spread of diseases. If your tap water is unsafe to use, wash your hands with soap and water that has been boiled or disinfected. You can set up a temporary handwashing area using a large jug containing clean water which has been boiled or disinfected.

If you live or work in an area which is prone to natural disasters, we recommend you put together an emergency supplies kit for use in a disaster situation. The kit should include emergency supplies of water, in addition to hygiene and sanitation supplies and food:
- Store a minimum of a three-day supply of water for each member of your family (1 gallon per person per day) and keep it in a dark, cool place. Replace stored water every six months and check the expiry dates on any shop bought water.

- Store around two weeks' worth of food supplies (a mixture of tinned and dried food).

- Ensure you know how to shut-off the supply of gas, electricity and water to your home and work locations.

- If you have a pet, keep emergency supplies of food and water for them too.

**Bathing after a disaster**

After a water-related disaster, only wash yourself in clean, safe water if at all possible. It *may* be possible to bathe in water which is not safe for drinking. Keep in contact with local authorities for the latest advice on water quality.

**Dental hygiene after a disaster**

Following a water-related disaster or an earthquake, you should only brush your teeth with clean, safe water as you would normally do. Keep in touch with the local authorities for up-to-date advice on water quality.

**Wound care during and after a disaster**

Wounds can easily become infected when exposed to flood waters, standing water, soil and sand. Crush injuries which commonly result from earthquakes and tropical cyclones are more likely to get infected than cuts. Seek medical advice regarding the need for tetanus immunisation.

It is vital you keep wounds dirt-free and covered during an emergency. Open cuts should be washed with soap and clean, safe water to help prevent infection. Wash your hands first before providing first aid for a wound and wear gloves if possible. Ensure your first aid kit always contains gloves.

Seek medical attention if:

- A wound becomes red, hot, swollen, painful, oozes or starts to smell.

- There is a foreign object (eg. soil, wood, metal, etc.) embedded in the wound.

- The wound involves a dog or other animal bite or has been caused by a dirty object.
Sources

- Global Hand Washing Day
- The Global Private Partnership for Hand Washing
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)
- WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care

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Last reviewed: May 2014