

Handwashing

So? Is it important to wash your hands?

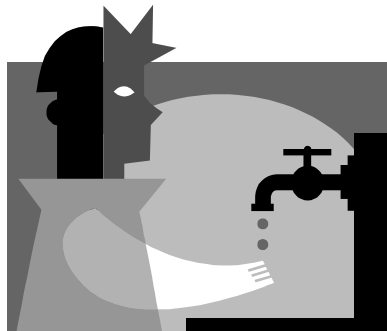
Simply put, yes. Hand washing is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of infections. This is especially important for those who work in public places like universities and colleges because of the inherent risks of daily contact with the public. "Good" hand washing techniques include using an adequate amount of soap, rubbing the hands together to create friction, and rinsing under running water. **The use of gloves is not a substitute for hand washing.**

PREVENTION

Usually, you can catch infectious diseases or illnesses from contact with other people – casually by hand contact or by being nearby when people cough or sneeze.

Classrooms are especially conducive to ease in the spread of infection due to the numbers of people and the close proximity in which they interact. You can also spread microbes by being in contact with or sharing items like food utensils, straws, etc. Once your hands have these microbes on them, you may touch your face (mouth, eyes, or in the nose) where the microbes may take hold and start an infection.

Please note: In some workplaces, universal precautions should be followed when workers are exposed to blood and certain other body fluids.



Handwashing is the single most important way to stop the spread of infections. Up to 80% of common infections are spread by hands.

What types of diseases can good handwashing prevent?

- Influenza
- Common cold
- E. coli O 157:H7
- Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)
- Hepatitis A

Other tips:

- Cover cuts with bandages and wear gloves for added protection (cuts are very vulnerable to infections).
- Artificial nails and chipped nail polish have been associated with an increase in the number of bacteria on the fingernails. Be sure to clean the nails properly.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Assume that contact with any human body fluids is infectious.
- Liquid soap in disposable containers is best. If using reusable containers, they should be washed and dried before refilling. If using a bar of soap, be sure to set it on a rack that allows water to drain or use small bars that can be changed frequently.

For more information:

Laura Lozanski

Health and Safety Officer
2675 Queensview Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K2B 8K2
Tel 613.820.2270
Fax 613.820.7244
Email lozanski@caut.ca

A Simple Guide to Hand Washing

- **Friction** ~ used to remove gross contamination, dead skin and other particles that contain potentially harmful organisms.
- **Soap** ~ breaks down skin oils that tend to hold these particles so that they are easier to remove.
- **Warm Running Water** ~ to remove debris and cleansing agents.

For effective hand washing, follow these steps:

- **remove any rings or other jewelry**
- **use warm water and wet your hands thoroughly**
- **use soap (1-3 mL) and lather very well**
- **scrub your hands, between your fingers, wrists, and forearms with soap for 30 seconds**
- **scrub under your nails**
- **rinse thoroughly**
- **turn off the tap/faucets ~with paper towel**
- **dry your hands with a single use towel or hot air dryer.**
- **NEVER USE A BASIN OF STANDING WATER FOR SHARED WASHING!**



When should I wash my hands?

- after classes,
- after using the washroom (includes changing diapers),
- before and after eating or handling food,
- after touching raw meat, poultry, or fish,
- after handling garbage,
- visiting or working with sick people,
- handling animals and their waste,
- changing wound dressings.



References

CCOHS — Hand Washing:
Reducing the Risk of Common
Infections: www.ccohs.ca
CCOHS Inquiries Service:
1-800-263-8466
1-905-572-4400

¹ELGIN ST. THOMAS HEALTH UNIT.
Health Protection Division

²Toronto Star, Sept. 15, 2003

³Hand Hygiene: Washing and
Disinfection. Michael John, MB,
Ch.B., FRCP

Published by the Canadian
Association of University
Teachers (CAUT).

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Handwashing up in Toronto — Post-SARS

■ A study was conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide, which compared observed behaviour of 7,541 people to the findings of a telephone poll of 1,000 Americans taken during the same month.

■ While 95 per cent of respondents said they wash their hands in public washrooms, the observed average — which was bolstered by Toronto's high numbers — showed that only 74 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women did so.

■ Similar surveys conducted in 1996 and in 2000 showed virtually the same percentage of people claiming they always wash their hands after sneezing or coughing into them and only 77 per cent said they washed their hands after changing a diaper.

■ Consider that in the context of this medical fact: most of the infectious diseases we suffer from in the course of a year are transmitted via the hand-to-mouth route.

■ Infectious disease experts say we could all reduce our risk of catching colds and nasty bugs like the Norwalk virus if we washed our hands more frequently. But, the message generally seems to fall on deaf ears.

■ Hospital workers are notorious for not washing their hands frequently enough — a fact that contributes to the spread of hard-to-shed antibiotic-resistant infections.²

Antibacterial soap

- There is no need to use antibacterial soaps in the home, school or workplace.
- Antibacterial soap should be reserved for hospital settings or work areas specifically identified for use
- Promotes antimicrobial resistance.
- Proper handwashing with regular soap and water can remove germs very effectively.

Although Oliver Wendell Holmes had already recognized the role of caregivers' hands in the transmission of puerperal fever, the Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis was the first to show, in the mid-19th century, that spread of this disease could be prevented by hand washing. Bacteria and viruses are commonly transmitted on the hands of health care workers, and hand washing is considered the single most important intervention to prevent such spread. Numerous epidemics have been traced to the so-called transient flora on the contaminated hands of health care workers.

In spite of these concerns, compliance with hand washing guidelines remains a problem. Given the strong case of hand washing, why does compliance remain so poor? A number of factors are associated with low rates of compliance with hand washing guidelines: lack of availability of sinks, adverse effects of hand washing on skin condition, high workload and low perceived risk³.