Clean Hands Are Everyone’s Responsibility

The Clean Hands Campaign, a continuing educational effort sponsored by SDA and ASM, is designed to remind Americans that Mom was right – you need to wash your hands!

Hand Hygiene Information Online

The American Society for Microbiology maintains a website, www.washup.org, that has downloadable educational materials about hand hygiene, as well as results of recent and previous handwashing surveys.

The Soap and Detergent Association has updated hand hygiene-related news and educational materials on its website at www.cleaning101.com/handhygiene and www.itsasnap.org.

ASM and SDA are members of the Clean Hands Coalition, an alliance of public and private partners working together to create and support coordinated, sustained initiatives to significantly improve health and save lives through clean hands. For information about National Clean Hands Week (the third week in September) and the “Clean Hands Save Lives” campaign, go to www.cleanhandscoalition.org.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website includes “Put Your Hands Together”, a health education video to promote handwashing at www.cdc.gov/Features/CDCtv/HandsTogether.html.

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps we can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others.

– CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

How should you wash your hands?

- Use soap and warm, running water
- Lather and wash all thoroughly, including wrists, palms, back of hands, fingers, and under fingernails for at least 15 - 20 seconds
- Rinse hands well under warm, running water
- Dry hands thoroughly with a clean paper or cloth towel or air dryer
- Apply hand lotion if desired to help prevent and soothe dry skin

Washing hands with soap and clean water for at least 15 - 20 seconds is a sensible strategy for hand hygiene in non-healthcare settings and is recommended by the CDC and other experts. Hand sanitizers are a good alternative to use when soap and water aren’t available. However, when hands are visibly soiled, they should be washed with soap and water.
Many cases of colds, flu, and foodborne illness are spread by unclean hands, and these diseases are responsible for billions of dollars each year in healthcare expenditures and productivity losses in the United States. Worldwide, infectious diseases remain the leading cause of illness and death and the third-leading cause of death in the United States. Good hand hygiene will also reduce the risk of spreading germs that have become resistant to antibiotics, such as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA. Some viruses and bacteria can live two hours or longer on surfaces like tables, doorknobs, and telephones. These disease-causing germs can enter your body when your unwashed hands touch your nose, mouth, eyes, or open wounds. Simple handwashing with soap and water can in some cases reduce infections by more than 50 percent.¹


When it comes to washing their hands, Americans say they are getting the message, but their actions speak otherwise.

Although nine out of ten (92%) Americans in a telephone survey said they always washed their hands after using a public restroom, an observational survey in four cities found the actual number to be more like 3 out of 4 (77%). That’s down nearly 10% from a similar study done in 2005, and men are mostly responsible for the decline. Overall, the percentage of women observed washing their hands was down only slightly from 90% in 2005 to 88% in 2007.

Americans’ self-reported hygiene behavior in 2007 remains consistent with what past surveys show. Among 1,001 men and women interviewed via telephone in 2007, 92 percent said they always wash their hands after going to a public restroom and 86 percent said they do likewise after using the bathroom in the home. In 2005, those figures were 91 percent and 83 percent, respectively.

When should you wash your hands?

- After using the restroom
- Before, during, and after preparing food, especially raw meat, poultry, or seafood
- Before and after meals and snacks
- Before inserting or removing contact lenses
- After touching animals or handling animal waste
- After changing a diaper
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick or injured
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- More frequently when you or someone in your home is sick
- Anytime your hands are dirty