

Washing your hands can be the key to good health

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Want to take your health into your own hands? Try washing them. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, keeping your hands clean is one of the most important steps you can take to stay healthy and avoid spreading germs to others.

You can pick up germs when you touch surfaces like elevator buttons or keyboards and then touch your own eyes, nose or mouth before washing your hands. According to CDC, some viruses and bacteria can live two hours or longer on surfaces like doorknobs and desks.

"When it comes to preventing infections, what we want to do is keep bacteria and viruses away from the places where they can start an infection, and those places are our mucus membranes, such as our eyes, nose or mouth," says Michael Bell, MD, associate director for infection control at CDC. "The thing that is most likely to come into contact with your eyes, your nose or your mouth are your fingers, so our own hands are a really big delivery

mechanism for bacteria and viruses."

Think about what happens when you go into an airport, a school or any public place. You have to touch things. You have to touch the railing on the escalator, the handle on the grocery cart, the tabletop at the cafeteria. All of those things can be dirty, but if you wash your hands before you touch your own face, then you aren't going to deliver the germs that can cause an infection.

As to how often you wash, there's no magic number, but you should always wash your hands before eating, after using the toilet, after blowing your nose, after coughing or sneezing into your hands, after handling garbage, before and after preparing food, after changing a diaper, after touching animals or animal waste, before and after treating wounds or cuts, before and after touching a sick or injured person, and before inserting or removing contact lenses.

"As a very rough guide, if you aren't washing your hands at least 10 times a day, you probably aren't washing your hands enough," Bell says. "If you think about it, you are probably visiting the restroom three or four times a day, and you are probably having three meals a day, and that alone gets you up to seven times, and I guarantee you the other three add up very quickly."

So roll up your sleeves and grab some soap. There's more to hand-washing than meets the eye — or nose or mouth.

Time to get in a lather

"Practically speaking, you can spend a long time washing your hands and do a poor job or you can be quick and do a thorough job of cleaning all the parts of your hands," Bell says.

If you're using soap and water, wet your hands with clean running water — warm water works best — and apply soap. Rub your hands together to make a nice lather and scrub all the surfaces. Don't forget to wash between your fingers and under your nails, as well as the backs of your hands, which people frequently



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miss, Bell says. Keep rubbing your hands together for about 20 seconds, then rinse them well under clean running water and dry them with a paper towel.

When it comes to safe food handling, neglecting to wash up is the most common mistake people make. Poor hand hygiene contributes to food-related illnesses such as salmonella and E. coli infection, and the bugs can spread through your kitchen and get on your hands, cutting boards and other surfaces. Washing your hands often will help prevent bacteria spreading from raw meat and poultry to the vegetables you're chopping for your salad.

So go ahead and spend all day in the kitchen whipping up that soufflé, but remember to wash your hands frequently, including before and after handling food.

Soap or sanitizer?

When it comes to washing your hands, any kind of soap and water will do the trick, and the soap doesn't have to be antibacterial.

"It can be plain old soap and water," says CDC's Bell. "For most things that we might be carrying on our hands, the combi-

nation of the detergent action of soap and the physical action of rinsing after you wash do a great job of removing or inactivating the germs on our hands."

Soap and water not handy? Pack some alcohol-based hand sanitizer in your purse or pocket. It's a terrific option if you don't have soap and water nearby. According to Bell, hand sanitizers don't have the mechanical action of removing germs from your hands, but they can do a good job of inactivating most germs in a pinch.



Practice your bedside manner

If you've visited someone in the hospital recently, you might have noticed a hand sanitizer dispenser on the wall just outside or inside the room. Aaron Glatt, MD, a spokesman for the Infectious Diseases Society of America, says you should use it to clean your hands prior to entering the room and again when you leave.

If you happen to see a doctor or nurse come from another patient's room without washing their hands, you have every right to speak up and ask them to wash up. Glatt, who is president and chief executive officer of New Island Hospital in Bethpage, N.Y., says many hospitals post signs saying: "Ask your doctor, ask your nurse, 'Did you wash your hands?'"



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