

Talking to Patients about Hand Hygiene and Handwashing.

Hand hygiene is the single most important thing we and patients can do to prevent the spread of infection. The Q&A below may help you address this with patients.

Q. Do you wash your hands between patients?

A. Yes, we wash our hands between patients. Our office follows the CDC guidelines and we wash our hands before putting gloves on and treating patients, and after we take our gloves off.

Q. I noticed you used a hand sanitizer. Is that OK instead of washing your hands?

A. If there is no debris or dirt on our hands, instead of soap and water we can use an alcohol-based handrub containing 60% to 95% alcohol. This is the concentration range that the CDC recommends to remove bacteria and other germs. It works really well.

Q. I read (heard) that a hand sanitizer (handrub) doesn't work as well as soap and water. Is that true?

A. Studies have shown that an alcohol-based handrub at the recommended concentration actually works better than soap and water to remove most germs, just as long as there's no debris (dirt) on your hands. If there is debris on our hands, then we have to wash them with soap and water—the handrub removes bacteria and other germs well, but it doesn't remove debris.

Q. Why is it important to remove the debris, isn't it the germs that are the problem?

A. Both are a problem—the germs because they spread infection, and the debris because if it isn't removed the germs under the debris are protected and aren't removed.

Q. Do you use antimicrobial soap? I heard that was better.

A. Antimicrobial soap and regular soap both work well. It only matters what soap we use if we're washing our hands prior to doing surgery. That's when the CDC recommends that we use an antimicrobial soap with persistent activity—this means that it keeps working to reduce germs on our hands even after we've dried them and put on gloves. Most surgery takes longer than other types of treatment, so this helps to prevent growth of germs under the gloves while we're working—which means it's safer for you even if the gloves are damaged.

Q. Why do you wash your hands if you're wearing gloves anyway?

A. Washing our hands first means we've removed germs before putting our gloves on. That means that if the gloves get damaged, those germs aren't present in your mouth. Germs can also multiply under gloves so it's important for that too.

Q. Why do you clean/wash your hands after removing your gloves, aren't gloves enough?

A. While we're wearing gloves, it's possible for them to get microscopic holes or tears over time. Cleaning/washing our hands after removing our gloves removes germs that may have been present under the gloves.

Q. Why is it recommended that I wash my hands frequently (I'm not treating patients)?

A. As the CDC says, "handwashing is like a 'do-it-yourself' vaccine." It's one of the best ways to remove germs, avoid getting sick, and protect your family and friends by helping to prevent the spread of germs to others. All that's necessary is to wet, lather, scrub for 20 seconds, rinse and dry your hands.

Q. Must I use antimicrobial soap to wash my hands at home (or elsewhere)?

A. Studies have not shown any added health benefit from using antimicrobial soap at home instead of regular soap. Regular soap and water are fine.

Q. What if I'm not near soap and running water and need to clean my hands?

A. If soap and water are not available, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Washing your hands with soap and water is the best way to reduce the number of germs on them in most situations and removes debris at the same time.

Q. How often should I wash my own hands (at home and elsewhere)?

A. A specific number of times is not recommended. How often depends on what you are (will be/were) doing. For example, if you will be, or touched food, to prepare it or will be eating, you should wash your hands. Other examples of situations when you should wash your hands include after using the toilet, changing a baby's diaper, blowing your nose, or coughing or sneezing. You should also wash your hands if you've been touching pets, waste, or pet treats.

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