Don’t Hand Me That

Hand Washing is a Must

Many bugs are now on the loose. Hospital bacteria such as *Staphylococcus aureus* which is resistant to many antibiotics and *Clostridium difficile* found in feces, have now been found elsewhere—schools, jails, sports teams, etc. Most flu viruses are transmitted through the air in virus-laden droplets propelled by coughs and sneezes.

Our hands are an important link in the chain of transmission of all of the above and many more microbes. Good hand hygiene is one of the most critical control strategies in outbreak management.[1] This includes flu epidemics.

Hand Washing and Drying

The fundamental principal of hand washing is removal, not killing. Rub all lathered surfaces briefly and vigorously followed by rinsing under a stream of warm water. Take your time. Be thorough. Wash for at least 20 seconds. This can reduce transmission of pathogens to other people, food, water and objects such as doorknobs, hand railings, etc.

Too much rubbing is not useful. Damaged skin can give pathogens a place to grow. Use hand lotions, especially in winter, to keep your skin intact. Don’t use a nail brush, but close attention should be paid to nail areas as well as between the fingers.

Dry your hands completely. The residual moisture determines the level of bacterial and viral transfer following hand washing. Careful hand drying is a critical factor for bacterial transfer to skin, food and environmental surfaces. Repeated drying of hands with reusable cloth towels should be avoided when possible. Single use paper towels, air drying and single use cloth towels are recommended.

Hand washing is required after:

- Using the toilet
- Cleaning toilets and bathrooms
- Handling potentially contaminated or soiled clothes and bed linens
- Cleaning up after a vomiting or fecal accident
- Cleaning and sanitizing environmental surfaces
- Before preparing food
- After eating, drinking and smoking
- After removing gloves

Anti-bacterial soap doesn’t kill many bacteria. Many researchers believe that widespread use of antibacterial soap will worsen the problem of antibiotic resistance.

Alcohol-based hand antiseptics

Use of alcohol does not replace washing with soap and water. Ethyl alcohol (60-90%) kills most bacteria and many viruses. It is much more effective when used after washing. Use it liberally over all surfaces. It is a good adjunct to proper hand washing.[2]

REMEMBER:

- Soap thoroughly
- Rinse liberally
- Dry completely
- Use alcohol generously
- Trim fingernails regularly

For more information see:

www.CDC.gov/ enter “hands”
www.health.harvard.edu

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1. General information on hand hygiene, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 28 December, 2006
2. Harvard Health Letter, Harvard Medical School, January, 2007