



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823
Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248
Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533
Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767

www.ccthd.org

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Wash Hands Often to Fight Germs

An independent technology company, CureResearch.com, estimates someone in the United States catches a cold 1 billion times each year. The Centers for Disease Control report over 52 million of those cases occur in children under the age of 17. (According to the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, children get 10 – 12 colds every year and most adults average 2 – 4 colds per year.) With cold and flu season just around the corner, now is a perfect time to remind people about the importance of proper handwashing in fighting the spread of not only these illnesses, but other infectious conditions like diarrhea, hepatitis A, and meningitis as well. The CDC notes that infectious diseases, often times spread by unclean hands, are the leading cause of death in the world, and the 3rd leading cause of death in the U.S.

Although it is true that colds and flu are spread through coughing and sneezing, most of the cases result from transmission through hand-to-hand contact and germ transfer from surfaces. Even when touching hard surfaces, the risk of contamination is high, because germs may remain on that surface for up to 48 hours. We all carry millions of microorganisms on our hands at all times, and most of them are harmless. But if we fail to wash our hands when appropriate, or fail to wash them thoroughly, we can spread germs to other people or ourselves when we touch our eyes, noses, mouths, and cuts and scratches on our bodies. When one considers all the things we touch every day, from telephones to hand-railings to doorknobs and water faucets, compounded by the number of people who have touched those surfaces within the previous 48 hours, the importance of hand washing should become obvious.

Unfortunately, perhaps because hand washing is such a basic, easy thing to do, many people fail to recognize its significance. However, the CDC points out that the “single most important thing you can do to prevent the spread of infection is to wash your hands.” Although nearly all of us realize it is important to wash our hands before eating, after using the restroom or changing diapers, before preparing food, after smoking, and after petting or holding animals, we also should be aware we need to wash our hands after sneezing, coughing, blowing your nose, and rubbing your eyes. Unfortunately, while we give lip service to hand-washing, the CDC notes observational studies continue to find that about 1/3 of men and 1/10 of women fail to wash their hands after using a public restroom in the United States. In the United Kingdom, similar studies reveal ½ of the males and a ¼ of the females wash their hands after using the restroom.

Even those who wash their hands when recommended may contribute to the spread of infectious diseases. That is because they often do not wash their hands long enough or thoroughly enough, many fail to use soap, they may dry their hands on bacteria-laden towels, or they do not dry them completely. (One source claims “damp hands spread 1000 times more germs than dry hands.”)

During National Handwashing Awareness Week from December 7th to the 13th, the CDC reminds people to reduce the spread of illness through frequent and proper handwashing. To maximize the benefits of this simple preventive measure, hands should be scrubbed with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds, then rinsed with clear water and dried with a clean towel. Scrubbing loosens dirt and microorganisms, and then the soap picks up the particles and binds with them to be washed away in the rinse water. It is important to wash the front and the back of the hands, between the fingers, and under the fingernails. Whenever possible, after

drying with a clean towel, turn the faucet off with the towel. Although the ideal temperature range for water is between 85-105⁰ F, today's soaps are of high quality and are effective even at low wash temperatures. Both regular and antibacterial soaps clean the hands, but the American Academy of Microbiology warns **against** the overuse of anti-bacterial soaps, as they may lead to the development of more resistant bacteria.

In the event there is no soap and water available to wash one's hands, an alcohol-based sanitizer can be used. The product should be applied to the palm of one hand, then the hands should be rubbed together, making sure the sanitizer has been rubbed over all the surfaces of the hands and fingers until they are dry. It is a good idea to carry liquid hand sanitizer at all times, and a number of products exist to make this easy to do. A good rule to follow is to wash your hands frequently.

To learn more about the importance of handwashing and the results of various studies that have been done, a number of sources are available online, including the CDC at www.cdc.gov, the National School Boards Association at www.nsba.org, the Food and Drug Administration at www.fda.gov, the Australian Food Safety Council at www.foodsafety.asn.au, and www.washup.org. The web site www.henrythehand.com has songs, games, and videos about handwashing for children. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District (860-721-2822) at www.ccthd.org.

