

Handwashing: Tips for Patients, Family, and Friends

Germs are everywhere around us. Normally, we live with germs without getting sick. In certain circumstances, harmful germs cause us to get sick with an infection. Or, we can spread harmful germs to others and cause them to get sick. Keeping your hands clean is the best way to prevent getting or spreading germs that cause infection. Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

WHEN TO CLEAN YOUR HANDS: FOR PATIENTS

In the hospital, you can come in contact with many harmful germs. To help prevent infection, wash your hands often, especially:

- After using the bathroom.
- Before and after eating.
- After coughing or sneezing.
- After using a tissue.
- After touching or changing a dressing or bandage.
- After touching any object or surface that may be contaminated.



If you don't have access to soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand gel containing at least 60 percent alcohol. These products kill most germs and are easy to use. But use soap and water, not hand gel, if your hands are visibly dirty.

WHEN TO CLEAN YOUR HANDS: FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

When visiting or caring for a loved one, washing your hands or using an alcohol-based hand cleaner can help stop germs from spreading. Wash your hands:

- Before entering and after leaving the patient's room.
- As soon as you remove gloves or other protective clothing.
- After changing a dressing or bandage.
- After any contact with blood or other body fluids.
- After touching or changing the patient's bed linen or towels.

Many hospitals have sinks or gel dispensers right outside patient rooms. If not, carry a bottle of alcohol-based hand gel with you, and use it every time you visit. Use soap and water, not alcohol-based hand gels, if your hands are visibly dirty.

TIPS FOR GOOD HANDWASHING

- Use warm water and plenty of soap. Work up a good lather.
- Clean the whole hand, under your nails, between your fingers, and up the wrists.
- Wash for at least 15 seconds. Don't just wipe. Scrub well.
- Rinse, letting the water run down your fingers, not up your wrists.
- Dry your hands well. Use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the door.

TIME MATTERS

The longer you wash your hands, the more germs you'll remove. Most people wash their hands for 6 to 7 seconds. But at least 15 seconds are needed to remove germs. To protect yourself and others from infection, washing for 30 seconds is best.

HOW DO ANTIBACTERIAL SOAPS AND ALCOHOL-BASED HAND CLEANERS DIFFER?

Antibacterial soaps:

- Come in liquid or bar form and are used with water
- Are no better at removing germs than plain soap

Alcohol-based hand cleaners:

- Come in gels or sprays that don't need water
- Are as or more effective than washing with soap and water