

Hand washing is an easy way to prevent infection. Frequent hand washing is one of the best ways to avoid getting sick and spreading illness. Hand washing requires only soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer — a cleanser that doesn't require water.

As you touch people, surfaces and objects throughout the day, you accumulate germs on your hands. In turn, you can infect yourself with these germs by touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Although it's impossible to keep your hands germ-free, washing your hands frequently can help limit the transfer of bacteria, viruses and other microbes.

Always wash your hands before:

- Preparing food
- Eating
- Treating wounds or giving medicine
- Touching a sick or injured person
- Inserting or removing contact lenses

Always wash your hands after:

- Preparing food, especially raw meat or poultry
- Using the toilet
- Changing a diaper
- Touching an animal or animal toys, leashes or waste
- Blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing into your hands
- Treating wounds
- Touching a sick or injured person
- Handling garbage or something that could be contaminated, such as a cleaning cloth or soiled shoes

Of course, it's also important to wash your hands whenever they look dirty.

It's generally best to wash your hands with soap and water. Follow these simple steps:

- Wet your hands with running water.
- Apply liquid, bar or powder soap.
- Lather well.
- Rub your hands vigorously for at least 20 seconds. Remember to scrub all surfaces, including the backs of your hands, wrists, between your fingers and under your fingernails.
- Rinse well.
- Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel or air dryer.
- If possible, use your towel to turn off the faucet.

Keep in mind that antibacterial soap is no more effective at killing germs than is regular soap. Using antibacterial soap may even lead to the development of bacteria that are resistant to the product's antimicrobial agents — making it harder to kill these germs in the future.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers — which don't require water — are an excellent alternative to soap and water. If you choose to use a commercially prepared hand sanitizer, make sure the product contains at least 60 percent alcohol. Then follow these simple steps:

- Apply enough of the product to the palm of your hand to wet your hands completely.
- Rub your hands together, covering all surfaces, for up to 25 seconds or until they're dry.

If your hands are visibly dirty, however, wash with soap and water. Antimicrobial wipes or towelettes are another option, although they're not as effective as alcohol-based sanitizers.

Hand washing doesn't take much time or effort, but it offers great rewards in terms of preventing illness. Adopting this simple habit can play a major role in protecting your health.