

Handwashing

Learn when and how to wash your hands



When done correctly, handwashing is your best protection against the spread of germs that can make people sick. You can clean your hands by washing your hands with soap and water or by using alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

When to wash your hands

You should wash your hands often to stay healthy, especially during these key times:

- Before, during, and after preparing food.
- Before and after eating.
- After touching garbage.
- After using the restroom.
- After blowing your nose, coughing, and sneezing.
- After changing diapers or helping someone use the toilet.
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick.
- Before and after treating a wound.
- After touching animals and their food or waste.
- Whenever your hands are visibly dirty.

How to wash your hands

Good handwashing technique is easy to learn and can significantly reduce the spread of germs.



When washing your hands with soap and water, follow these steps:

1. Wet your hands with warm running water.
2. Add soap, then rub your hands together. Do this away from the running water for at least 20 seconds. Wash the front and back of your hands, as well as between your fingers and under your nails.
3. Rinse your hands well under running water. Let the water run back into the sink, not down your elbows.
4. Dry your hands thoroughly with a clean paper towel. Then turn off the water with a clean paper towel and dispose of it.



When using alcohol-based hand sanitizer, follow these steps:

1. Apply the product to the palm of one hand (read the label to learn the correct amount).
2. Cover all surfaces of your hands.
3. Rub your hands and fingers together until they are dry. This should take about 20 seconds.



Frequently asked questions about handwashing



How does handwashing prevent the spread of disease?

Diseases can spread when we come into contact with hands or other items (such as food, doorknobs, or toys) contaminated with urine, poop, saliva, or respiratory secretions. This is why washing your hands frequently, and at key times such as after using the toilet, is very important. Rubbing your hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer kills germs on your hands, while washing with soap and water removes germs from the hands.



What type of soap or hand sanitizer should be used?

Hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol is very effective at killing most germs on the hands. Any type of soap may be used to wash your hands. Liquid soap containers should be used until empty and cleaned before refilling. Soap containers used in community settings (such as day cares, long-term care facilities and rest rooms) should be disposable, and discarded when empty.



Is it better to use warm or cold water?

You can use either warm or cold water to wash your hands. The water helps create a soap lather, which is what removes germs from your skin.



What areas of the hands are commonly missed when handwashing?

Thumbs, fingertips, and between the fingers are areas that are commonly missed. Pay attention to these areas when washing your hands.



Do I need to wash my hands if I wore gloves?

Using gloves is not a substitute for washing your hands. Always wash your hands before putting on and after removing gloves.



Can I use hand sanitizer instead of washing my hands with soap and water?

Both can be effective ways to clean your hands. However, there are times when you should use soap and water to wash your hands such as:

- Before eating.
- After caring for someone with diarrhea or vomiting.
- After using the bathroom.
- When your hands are visibly dirty.

For more information on handwashing, visit www.dhs.wi.gov/disease/handwashing.htm.

