



**Proper handwashing is the #1 way to keep germs from spreading. Many studies have shown that handwashing education and proper handwashing with soap reduce the transmission of illness. One study reported reduced absenteeism due to gastrointestinal illness in schoolchildren by 29-57%.**

During common daily activities, hands get contaminated with germs that cause respiratory, gastrointestinal or other illnesses. Germs get on hands from activities like using the bathroom, changing a diaper, handling raw meat, playing with animals or cleaning up after them. A single gram of human feces (poop) — which is about the weight of a paper clip — can contain one trillion germs. When these germs get onto hands and are not washed off, they can be passed from person to person and make people sick. Germs can get on hands when people touch things that have been contaminated, for example, touching an object that was coughed or sneezed on or touched by another contaminated object.

### **Wash hands correctly.**

To be effective, handwashing should take at least 20 seconds, with most time spent scrubbing. Pay special attention to the area under the fingernails, which has the largest concentration of germs on the hand and is the most difficult to clean. Antibacterial soap is not recommended. Use plain fragrance-free soap. Follow the steps in the box to the right:

### **Wash hands often.**

It is important to wash hands often because people may have germs on their hands then touch their eyes, nose, and mouth without even realizing it. Provide time needed for all students and staff to wash hands frequently, especially:

- Before preparing or eating food
- After using the bathroom
- After recess, P.E. class, sports practice or games
- After returning from a field trip
- After petting, handling or cleaning up after animals
- After blowing nose, coughing or sneezing
- After touching an infected wound
- Before and after treating a cut or wound
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick
- After touching garbage

### **Teach students the right way to wash hands:**

- Wet hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), and apply soap.
- Lather hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Be sure to lather the backs of hands, between fingers, and under nails.
- Scrub hands for at least 20 seconds. Use handwashing songs to encourage complete handwashing.
- Rinse hands well under clean, running water.
- Dry hands using a clean towel then turn off the tap.

### **Choose handwashing instead of hand sanitizer.**

Hand sanitizers are not a substitute for proper handwashing; they are not effective when hands are dirty or greasy. Proper handwashing with soap and water removes germs and dirt. Scrubbing and rinsing are necessary to wash off the dirt, which may be contaminated with many substances that children should not be ingesting. Application of hand sanitizers typically does not include the important scrubbing, rinsing and drying steps. While hand sanitizers are effective against some germs (like the viruses that cause influenza), they do not kill all germs (like norovirus, which causes gastrointestinal illness). When there is no access to a sink, such as on a field trip, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers (at least 60% alcohol, dye-free and fragrance-free). Be aware that some people may have a sensitivity reaction since hand sanitizers are a chemical.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How effective is handwashing at reducing illness?

Many studies cited on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website have shown that handwashing education and access to soap in schools can help improve attendance. Handwashing education in the community:

- Reduces the number of people who get sick with diarrhea by 23-40%
- Reduces diarrheal illness in people with weakened immune systems by 58%
- Reduces respiratory illnesses, like colds, in the general population by 16-21%
- Reduces absenteeism due to gastrointestinal illness in schoolchildren by 29-57%

### Why use plain soap for handwashing?

Antibacterial ingredients, in particular triclosan and quaternary ammonia compounds (quats), only kill a few types of germs and are unnecessary when washing hands. It doesn't matter if germs are alive or dead when they are washed down the drain.

### What about non-alcohol hand sanitizers?

The CDC only recommends hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol. Non-alcohol ones are even less effective than alcohol hand sanitizers and many can cause sensitivity reactions.

### Why is it important to use fragrance-free products in school?

Fragrance is one of the most frequently identified allergens, can irritate the respiratory system, cause headaches, and exacerbate asthma.

### Where can I find additional resources?

Spokane Regional Health District's *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* handout discusses how classroom cleaning also helps prevent the spread of illness:

<https://srhd.org/media/documents/Cleaning-for-Health-in-the-Classroom1.pdf>

Handwashing resources from CDC:

- Printable posters: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/posters.html>
- Training and education: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/training-education.html>
- Show me the science: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/show-me-the-science.html>
- Fact sheets: <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/fact-sheets.html>
- Handwashing song video: <https://tools.cdc.gov/medialibrary/index.aspx#/media/id/302345>

Basic Washington State Department of Health (DOH) handwashing signs:

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Food/FoodWorkerandIndustry/HandWashingSigns>

For more information contact Spokane Regional Health District's School Health & Safety program at 324.1560, ext. 4 or visit our web site at [srhd.org/schoolinspection](http://srhd.org/schoolinspection).

*Content adapted from information provided by the WA State Department of Health and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

*Always working for a safer and healthier community*