



KidsHealth

# GERM PATROL



“Did you wash your hands?”

How many times did you hear that today? Probably a lot. But why are adults so hung up on hand washing? Why are they so in love with lather?

Washing your hands is the best way to stop germs from spreading. Think about all of the things that you touched today – from the telephone to the toilet. Maybe you blew your nose in a tissue and then went outside to dig around the dirt. Whatever you did today, you came into contact with germs. It’s easy for a germ on your hand to end up in your mouth. Think about how many foods you eat with your hands.

You can’t wear rubber gloves all day long, but you can wash your hands so those germs don’t get a chance to make you or someone else sick. When germs go down the drain, they can’t make anyone sick.

So when are the best times to wash your hands?

- before eating or touching food (like if you’re helping cook or bake, for example)
- after using the bathroom
- after blowing your nose or coughing
- after touching pets or other animals
- after playing outside
- before and after visiting a sick relative or friend

Now you have the when and the why of hand washing. But did you know that a lot of people don’t know **how** to get their paws perfectly clean? The next time you’re told to stop up to the sink and scrub up, remember these handy hints:

1. Use warm water (not cold or hot) when you wash your hands.
2. Use whatever soap you like. Some soaps come in cool shapes and colors or smell nice, but whatever kind that gets you scrubbing is the kind you should use. Antibacterial soaps are OK to use, but regular soap works fine.
3. Work up some lather on both sides of your hands, your wrists, and between your fingers. Don’t forget to wash around your nails. This is one place germs like to hide. Wash for about 10 to 15 seconds – about how long it takes to sing “Happy Birthday.” (Sing it quickly two times or just once if you go nice and slow.)
4. Rinse and dry well with a clean towel.



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## Why Is Hand Washing So Important?

A delicious mud pie, a good-luck rock, or a friendly frog are just a few of the presents children love to bring home to Mom and Dad. But did you know that behind those adorable gifts – and countless others – millions of germs could be lurking?

Kids may not always listen when you tell them to wash their hands before eating, but it's a message worth repeating. Hand washing is by far the best way to prevent germs from spreading and to keep your kids from getting sick.

### The First Line of Defense Against Germs

Germs – such as bacteria and viruses – can be transmitted several different ways, especially by touching dirty hands or changing dirty diapers. Other ways germs spread include:

- through contaminated water and food
- through droplets released during a cough or a sneeze
- through contaminated surfaces
- through a sick person's body fluids

If kids pick up germs from one of these sources, they can unknowingly become infected simply by touching their eyes, nose, or mouth. And once they're infected, it's usually just a matter of time before the whole family comes down with the same illness.

Good hand washing is your first line of defense against the spread of many illnesses – and not just the common cold. More serious illnesses such as meningitis, bronchiolitis, influenza, hepatitis A, and most types of infectious diarrhea can be stopped with the simple act of washing your hands.



### How to Wash Your Hands Correctly

Here are some simple steps for scrubbing those germs away. Demonstrate this routine to your child – or better yet, wash your hands together with your child several times a day so he or she learns how important this good habit is.

1. Wash your hands in warm water. Make sure the water isn't too hot for little hands.
2. Use soap and lather up for about 10 to 15 seconds (antibacterial soap isn't necessary – any soap will do). Make sure you get in between the fingers and under the nails where uninvited germs like to hang out. And don't forget the wrists!
3. Rinse and dry well with a clean towel.

To minimize the germs passed around your family, make frequent hand washing a rule for everyone, especially:

- before eating and cooking
- after using the bathroom
- after cleaning around the house
- after touching animals, including family pets
- before and after visiting or taking care of any sick friends or relatives
- after blowing one's nose, coughing, or sneezing
- after being outside (playing, gardening, walking the dog, etc.)

Don't underestimate the power of hand washing! The few seconds you spend at the sink with your child could save you trips to the doctor's office.

If your child is reluctant about hand washing, try these tips:

- Use colorful soaps made especially for kids. Some soaps also come in interesting shapes or have fun scents to make hand washing fun.
- Have your child sing a favorite song while lathering up. By the time the tune is done, those germs should be washed away!



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