

---

# Public Health : Hand Washing

---

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

## Why is hand washing important?

Hand washing, when done correctly, is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Good hand washing technique is easy to learn and can significantly reduce the spread of infectious diseases among both children and adults.

Follow these four simple steps to keeping hands clean :

1. Wet your hands with warm running water.
2. Add soap, and then rub your hands together, making a soapy lather. Do this away from the running water for at least 10 seconds, being careful not to wash the lather away. Wash the front and back of your hands, as well as between your fingers and under your nails.
3. Rinse your hands well under warm running water. Let the water run back into the sink, not down to your elbows. Turn off the water with a paper towel and dispose in a proper receptacle.
4. Dry hands thoroughly with a clean towel.

## What is good hand washing technique?

There is more to hand washing than you think! By rubbing your hands vigorously with soapy water, you pull the dirt and the oily soils free from your skin. The soap lather

suspends both the dirt and germs trapped inside and are then quickly washed away.

## What type of soap should be used?

Any type of soap may be used. However, bar soap should be kept in a self draining holder that is cleaned thoroughly before new bars are put out and liquid soap containers (which must be used in day care centers) should be used until empty and cleaned before refilling.

To prevent chapping use a mild soap with warm water; pat rather than rub hands dry; and apply lotion liberally and frequently.

## Hand disinfection

If the water is not safe for drinking because of germs (bacteria, viruses or parasites), good handwashing with soap and water should be followed up with hand disinfection for good hand hygiene. Hand disinfection is when additional agents are used to kill germs living on your hands. This may be done using alcohol based rubs/gels/rinses.

## What are alcohol rubs/gels/rinses ?

Alcohol rubs/gels/rinses are excellent hand disinfectants, containing more than 60% alcohol. They are widely used in the health care setting after washing hands, or in situations when water is not available.

### **How do I use alcohol based hand disinfectants ?**

Dirt should be removed from your hands. Alcohol based hand disinfectants work best on clean skin, so wash your hands with soap and warm water, even if the water is not fit to drink.

Carefully dry your hands, as water on wet hands will dilute the alcohol content of the disinfectant product, decreasing its effectiveness.

Apply enough disinfectant to make about the size of a dime onto your hands, enough when you rub your hands together to cover all areas of your hands, including under the your nails. Use a rubbing motion to evenly distribute the disinfectant product for about 15 seconds, or until your hands feel dry whichever is longest.

### **How safe are alcohol based hand disinfectants ?**

Very safe. The alcohol content of the disinfectant product completely evaporates in 15 seconds. You should use hand lotion after each use of the alcohol based hand disinfectant. This will balance the drying effect of alcohol on your skin.

### **Is it safe to use alcohol-based disinfectant for the hands of children ?**

Yes, it is safe. It should not be swallowed, therefore, young children should be supervised when using it. Store it safely. After application of the disinfectant to hands the alcohol content evaporates, and children can safely touch their mouth or eyes.

### **What are some mistakes I should avoid regarding hand washing?**

- DON'T use a single damp cloth to wash a group of children's hands.
- DON'T use a standing basin of water to rinse hands.
- DON'T use a common hand towel. Always use disposable towels in day care or food preparation settings.
- DON'T use sponges or non-disposable cleaning cloths unless you launder them on a regular basis, adding chlorine bleach to the wash water. Remember that germs thrive on moist surfaces.

### **What are some ways to help children with good hand washing technique?**

It is important to encourage and help children to wash hands before eating, after playing outdoors or playing with pets, after using the bathroom, and after blowing their noses.

Even though hands may appear to be clean, they may carry germs or microorganisms that are capable of causing disease. Don't assume that children know how to wash their hands properly. Supervision, especially in a day care setting, is an essential element in forming good hand washing habits in children.

Children learn by example! Let them observe good hand washing technique from the adults who care for them.

## **Government of Ontario**

For information about health services and resources :

[www.health.gov.on.ca](http://www.health.gov.on.ca)

For consumer-friendly health tips and information :

[www.HealthyOntario.com](http://www.HealthyOntario.com)

INFOline: 1-877-234-4343;

TTY: 1-800-387-5559

Telehealth Ontario:

1-866-797-0000; TTY 1-866-797-0007

INFOline is open during business hours and can provide general information on healthcare.

Telehealth Ontario is a 24/7 service which uses nurse practitioners to answer your immediate health concerns.