



APUA

Handwashing: the first line of defense

Consumers and Patients

A Quick Reference Sheet from the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics

Washing your hands is still the easiest way to protect yourself from disease

Disease-causing germs on your unwashed hands can enter your body when you touch your nose, mouth, and open wounds. Alternatively, these germs can spread to others by handling shared items and touching common surfaces. Washing your hands properly greatly reduces the risk of transmission. In fact, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, handwashing is one of the most important means of preventing the spread of infection.

When to wash hands

Wash hands before:

- Eating or serving food
- Preparing a meal
- Putting in contact lenses
- Tending to someone who is sick or treating a break in the skin

Wash hands after:

- Using the bathroom
- Changing a baby
- Taking out trash
- Playing with, touching, or cleaning up after pets, especially reptiles and exotic animals
- Touching uncooked food, particularly raw meat, poultry, or fish
- Tending to someone who is sick or treating a break in the skin
- Blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing



A recent survey found that 94% of Americans say that they always wash their hands after going to the bathroom, but observations in public restrooms show that only 68% of adults actually do so.



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Washing hands the right way

Remember, how you wash your hands is just as important as when you wash them!

- **Use soap and warm, running water.**
- **Wash all surfaces thoroughly, including wrists, palms, back of hands, fingers, and under the fingernails.**
- **Rub hands together for at least 20 seconds.**
- **When drying, use a clean or disposable towel if possible, and pat your skin rather than rubbing to avoid chapping and cracking**
- **Apply hand lotion after washing to soothe your skin and help prevent drying.**

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are a good alternative when you can't get to soap and water—but don't be tempted to use them as a regular substitute for soap and water. The friction of washing helps physically remove bacteria (as well as things like dirt) from your hands.

Should I use antibacterial soap — just to make extra sure I kill all of the germs?

Regular soap and water are typically all that is needed. However, if someone in your family is already sick or has an immune system that has been weakened by chemotherapy, HIV, or some other cause, use of antimicrobial soaps may offer some benefit. Under these circumstances, antibacterials should be used according to protocol, preferably under the guidance of a health care professional.

For more information on the benefits of handwashing, proper handwashing technique, and when to wash your hands, please see:

<http://www.cdc.gov/cleanhands/>



***Established in 1981, the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics (APUA) is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to preserving the effectiveness of antibiotics and other antimicrobials.**

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