

Washing hands is the best way to avoid spreading germs

By Dr. Danielle Grenier

Q: Now that we've entered flu season, I want to make sure I'm doing everything I can to prevent my one-year-old from getting sick. What's the absolute best way to stop the spread of germs?

A: Washing your hands and your children's hands is the best way to stop the spread of germs. You are always collecting germs on your hands, by opening doors, wiping faces, playing with toys and changing diapers. You can't avoid them, but you can reduce the chance of passing them to others by washing your hands.

Parents need to wash their hands before cooking or eating, feeding a baby or child (including breastfeeding) and before giving medication to a child. You should wash your hands after changing a diaper, helping a child use a toilet, using a toilet yourself, taking care of a sick child, handling pets or animals, cleaning pet cages or litter boxes, wiping or blowing your own or your child's nose or preparing food.

Remind your child to wash his or her hands anytime they are visibly dirty and before eating or handling food. Children should also always wash their hands after having a diaper change, using a toilet, playing outdoors, playing with pets or animals, sneezing or coughing into their hands or blowing noses.

Teach toddlers to wash their hands in a relaxed and fun way, for at least 15 to 30 seconds whether their hands are visibly dirty or not. Singing the alphabet or a hand washing song can be a motivator for both of you.

Here are four key steps to proper hand washing:

- Wet your hands under running water.
- Scrub your hands well with soap.
- Rinse your hands under running water.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel.

Additional steps to cleaning a baby's hands:

- Wash your baby's hands with soap and a warm, wet, fresh towel (either paper or cloth).
- Rinse the baby's hands with another fresh, warm, wet towel.
- Dry the hands well.

When water and soap are not available, use alcohol-based hand rinses or pre-moistened hand wipes. Be sure to choose a product that is alcohol-based. Some waterless hand cleaners don't contain alcohol and won't destroy germs. Because they contain 60 to 90 per cent alcohol, hand rubs are a fire hazard and can also be harmful to children if swallowed. Keep them safely out of reach, avoid contact with eyes and, because hand rubs are flammable, make sure hands are dry before moving on to the next activity.

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