Handwashing do's and don'ts [1]

Dear Alice,

I live on a college campus and have noticed many people do not wash their hands after going to the bathroom! I was so shocked, I confronted one of my friends. She replied: "If I don't get anything icky on my hands, I just rinse them without soap. If my hands do get 'dirty,' I wash them with soap." Is her handwashing philosophy correct? Does rinsing your hands without soap do any good?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Well, you do have to wonder why health department signs in restaurant bathrooms ask employees to wash their hands with soap and water before returning to work. These health and hygiene experts may just be on to something. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), one in four food-borne illnesses, among many other illnesses and diseases, are caused by unwashed or inadequately washed hands.

Have you asked your friend if she believes that she can see every "icky" thing that might get on her hands when she uses the toilet? How about anything "icky" that might get on her hands at other times of the day? You might encourage her to consider the possibility of the person who used the toilet before her leaving behind some bacteria, viruses, pathogens, or other microorganisms on the door or toilet handle. Then your friend flushes the toilet, opens the door, and walks out without washing her hands. Not only has she picked up some sort of microorganism, but now she will be spreading it around, too. That person could have had a cold, the flu, strep throat, or something else. If your friend then touches her mouth, nose, or eyes with her unwashed hands, she’s more likely to infect herself (as well as others with whom she comes into contact). This makes some people wonder why we all still shake hands with each other.

Handwashing is not only is it an easy thing to do, but is considered the number one way to prevent the spread of infection-causing critters picked up from contact with infected individuals or contaminated surfaces and objects. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health, good handwashing only requires three key elements:

- Soap
- Running water
In hospitals, employees learn that it takes about five minutes of washing with soap and water to rid the skin of microorganisms that can cause infection. However, five minutes may be longer than the average person wants to spend at the bathroom sink. Even if not investing several minutes, each person should (at the very least) actively rub her/his hands and fingers together with soap, producing a lather that covers all surfaces of the hands (including fingers and under fingernails), for at least ten to fifteen seconds (longer for hands that look dirty or have not been washed in a couple of hours). Follow that with a thorough rinse under running water. Pay attention to rings and long fingernails, both of which trap bacteria and dirt. If a person has long nails, a nail brush should be used at least once a day to scrub under them. To avoid recontaminating one's hands, use a clean paper towel to turn off the faucet, and then dry hands with an air-dryer or new disposable towel.

If all these suggestions leave you wondering whether or not you should have chosen to live in a plastic bubble on the far end of campus, know that a healthy immune system can successfully fight off lots of bacteria and viruses before they make you sick. Adequate sleep, regular stress management, and maintaining a balanced eating plan can all help keep each person's immune system up and running. And keeping your hands and fingers away from your eyes, nose, and mouth will thwart delivery of loads of icky stuff into your body in the first place.

Now that you have more factual information, you can inform your residence hall floor friends about the virtues of proper handwashing. And, let's hope that the news (and only the news) will continue to spread from there.

Alice!

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