

Soap and water: Proper handwashing fodder ^[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,

You aren't the only one to wonder if suds are strictly necessary to get your hands squeaky clean. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ^[2], washing your hands with water AND soap is one of the top ways to prevent disease transmission. This can help prevent you and others from getting sick, especially during cold and flu season. To your point about when to wash hands — soaping up your paws after using the toilet is definitely on the recommended list. And, while rinsing your hands may remove some germs, adding soap to the equation really bumps up the cleansing power of handwashing!

Handwashing isn't only easy to do, but is considered — hands down — a key strategy in curbing the spread of infection-causing germs picked up from contact with infected individuals or contaminated surfaces and objects. And, it only requires three elements: soap, clean, running water, and friction. To effectively wash your hands:

- Use clean, running water (warm or cold), and apply soap.
- Rub your hands together creating a lather, paying special attention to get the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
- Continue rubbing your hands together for 20 seconds (try humming the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice).
- Use clean, running water to rinse your hands.
- Dry your hands using a clean towel or simply air dry them.

Adapted from the [CDC](#) [3].

So, what about rinsing without soap? Consider this: can you see every "icky" substance that might get on your hands after you use the toilet? How about anything that might get on your hands at other times of the day? You might encourage your friend to consider the possibility that there may be bacteria, viruses, pathogens, or other microorganisms on the door or toilet handle that aren't visible to the naked eye. Suggesting to your friend that thoroughly suds-ing up and washing her hands every time she uses the commode — even if nothing is visibly on her hands — may be beneficial. She may pick up some sort of microorganism and could be spreading it around to others without knowing it. In your friendly discussion, you may both be wondering what to do in those instances when clean water and soap isn't available. It's recommended that if you can't get your hands on soap and water, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (containing at least 60 percent alcohol). These measures help ensure that germ spread is reduced, decreasing the exposure that others have to disease-causing pathogens.

While washing your hands is a helpful way of keeping the germs at bay, a healthy immune system can also help you successfully fight off many bacteria and viruses before they make you sick. Adequate sleep, effectively managing your stress, 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 help thwart the delivery of germs into your body in the first place.

Now that you have more information, you might consider sharing the knowledge with your floor mates about the virtues of proper handwashing. Not only will it keep your hands cleaner, but it may help to keep you illness free, too! Here's hoping that the news (and only the news) will continue to spread from there.

Alice!

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