HEALTH BASICS

Hand-washing

Hand-washing is cleaning your hands with soap and water to remove dirt and germs.

WHAT IT IS
Cleaning hands with soap and water

WHERE IT COMES UP
Daily hygiene, food preparation, caregiving, and healthcare

WHY IT MATTERS
Reduces germ transfer between people, objects, and food

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, primary care clinician, or occupational health service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
None; routine hand-washing needs no test

Overview

Hand-washing uses soap, clean running water, and rubbing to remove dirt, grease, chemicals, and germs from your hands. Germs are microscopic organisms, such as bacteria and viruses. Some can cause infections, while many are harmless.

Your hands regularly touch shared surfaces, food, animals, body fluids, and your face. Washing at useful times can reduce the chance of carrying germs from one place to another.

Hand-washing is not a disease, diagnosis, or medical treatment. It is a practical hygiene measure. It lowers risk but cannot remove every germ or guarantee that an infection will not occur.

Soap and water are usually preferred when your hands are visibly dirty or greasy. They are also important after using the toilet and before preparing food. Alcohol-based hand sanitiser can be useful when soap and water are unavailable, provided your hands are not visibly soiled.

How it works

Water alone can rinse away some material, but soap makes cleaning more effective. Soap

loosens oils, dirt, and microbes from the skin. Rubbing reaches around fingers, nails, creases, and other areas where material can remain. Running water then carries it away.

A practical hand-washing method is:

Rub your palms, the backs of your hands, between your fingers, around your thumbs, and near your fingertips and nails. Rings and watches can leave areas less thoroughly cleaned.

Water does not need to be hot enough to feel uncomfortable. Clean running water and thorough rubbing matter more. Very hot water may irritate or dry the skin.

Drying is part of the process because germs transfer more easily from wet hands than from dry hands. In a public bathroom, use the available clean drying method. Avoid wiping freshly washed hands on visibly dirty clothing or towels.

Alcohol-based hand sanitiser works differently. Alcohol damages many types of germs, but sanitiser does not physically remove dirt, grease, or harmful chemicals. When using it, apply enough to cover every hand surface and rub until dry. Do not wipe it off before it dries.

- Wet your hands with clean running water.
- Apply soap.
- Rub all hand surfaces for at least 20 seconds.
- Rinse under clean running water.
- Dry with a clean towel or air dryer.

Why it matters for your health

Useful hand-washing can interrupt routes by which infections spread. For example, germs from stool may reach food or the mouth through unwashed hands. Germs from coughs, sneezes, or shared objects may reach the eyes, nose, or mouth.

Hand-washing is particularly relevant:

Healthcare and care settings may have additional hand-hygiene rules. These help protect people who are more vulnerable to infection. Follow instructions from the hospital, clinic, care home, or occupational health service.

Gloves do not replace hand hygiene. Gloves can have small defects, and hands may become contaminated while gloves are removed. Wash or sanitise your hands at the times required for the task.

- Before preparing, serving, or eating food

- After using the toilet or helping someone with toileting
- After changing a nappy
- Before and after caring for someone who is ill
- Before and after dealing with a cut or wound
- After coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose
- After touching animals, animal waste, or pet food
- After handling rubbish
- When hands are visibly dirty or greasy

What can go wrong

Poor hand hygiene can contribute to the spread of respiratory infections, infectious gastroenteritis, foodborne illness, conjunctivitis, and some skin or wound infections. Hand-washing is only one protective measure, so an infection can still spread despite careful hygiene.

Washing too briefly or missing the thumbs, fingertips, and spaces between fingers may leave contamination behind. Touching a dirty tap, phone, door handle, or towel immediately afterward can contaminate clean hands again.

Frequent washing can remove protective oils from the skin. This may cause dryness, cracking, irritant contact dermatitis, or worsening eczema. Contact dermatitis means skin inflammation caused by irritation or an allergic reaction. Cracked skin can be painful and may make work involving repeated washing difficult.

Routine dryness or irritation can usually be discussed with a pharmacist, primary care clinician, dermatologist, or occupational health service. Seek prompt medical advice if the skin becomes increasingly painful, hot, swollen, or produces pus, as these changes can occur with a skin infection.

Hand sanitiser creates other risks. It can be harmful if swallowed and should be stored away from young children. Because alcohol-based products are flammable, keep wet sanitiser away from flames, sparks, and high heat until your hands are dry. If sanitiser is swallowed, contact your local poison information service promptly. Call emergency services for collapse, severe breathing difficulty, or inability to wake the person.

Repeated washing can sometimes be part of obsessive-compulsive disorder when it is driven by intrusive fears, is difficult to control, damages the skin, or seriously disrupts daily life. This

does not mean that frequent washing for healthcare, food work, or infection control is itself a disorder. If washing feels compulsory or is interfering with your life, arrange routine support from a primary care or mental health professional.

What you can do

For everyday use, plain soap is generally enough. Antibacterial soap is not usually needed in the home unless a healthcare professional or workplace protocol specifies it.

Focus on washing at meaningful times rather than washing continuously. Use soap and running water when hands are dirty, after toileting, and around food preparation. If those are unavailable, an alcohol-based hand sanitiser containing at least 60% alcohol is an option for many routine situations.

To reduce skin irritation:

A moisturiser does not undo the cleaning effect once your hands have been rinsed and dried. If you work in healthcare, food handling, childcare, or another regulated setting, check which products are permitted.

No test is needed to confirm that ordinary hand-washing has worked. Visual checks, ultraviolet training products, or laboratory samples may be used in research or workplace training, but they are not routine health tests.

If irritation keeps returning, keep a short record of the soaps, sanitisers, gloves, and moisturisers you use. Note when the problem is worst. You can ask a pharmacist or clinician whether an irritant or allergy may be involved and whether patch testing-a test for delayed skin allergies-would be useful.

- Rinse soap off fully
- Pat hands dry rather than rubbing hard
- Use a fragrance-free moisturiser after washing
- Choose a gentler soap if your skin becomes irritated
- Follow workplace skin-care and glove guidance

Common questions

Is hand sanitiser as good as washing?

It is a useful alternative in many settings, but not in every situation. Soap and water are

preferred when hands are visibly dirty or greasy and after using the toilet. Sanitiser may also work less well against certain germs and does not remove harmful chemicals.

Do I need antibacterial soap?

Usually not for routine home hand-washing. Plain soap, water, thorough rubbing, rinsing, and drying are effective practical measures.

Does cold water work?

Yes. Use a comfortable temperature. The cleaning action comes mainly from soap, rubbing, rinsing, and drying rather than from very hot water.

Should I use a nail brush?

A nail brush is not normally needed for everyday washing. Brushes can damage skin or become contaminated if not maintained properly. Follow specific workplace instructions if your role requires one.

Can I wash too often?

Yes. Unnecessary repeated washing may dry and irritate the skin. However, people in healthcare, food preparation, or caregiving may need frequent hand hygiene because of their work. Skin-care measures and occupational health advice can help.

Should I wash after touching every public surface?

Usually no. Concentrate on important moments, such as before eating or touching your face, after toileting, and when your hands are dirty. Sanitiser can be convenient when washing facilities are unavailable.

Sources

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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hand Sanitizer Guidelines and Recommendations .
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- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Safely Using Hand Sanitizer .
- National Health Service. Contact dermatitis .