

DECEMBER: HANDWASHING AWARENESS

“My mom taught me to wash my hands before I could talk! What’s the big deal??”

Well, America’s grade on its *Clean Hands Report Card* was a “C-minus”, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Soap & Detergent Association (SDA)!! This study was based on a survey of 1,008 American adults (508 men and 500 women), performed in August and September of 2006. (The survey had a statistical error margin of 3%.... that means there is less than 3% chance that the results of the study are incorrect.)

Why is hand washing so important?... Because the increased incidence of contagious skin infections, the threat of pandemic (world-wide epidemic) influenza (like avian, bird flu) and the upcoming flu and cold seasons make it “more important than ever that people understand that clean hands save lives,” says Nancy Bock, SDA Vice President of Education. Among the hand hygiene survey findings:

- 68% of people didn’t wash their hands long enough to effectively remove dirt and germs (CDC recommends washing *vigorously* with soap and warm water for 20 seconds OR applying a alcohol-based hand cleansing gel (like Purell or other brands you can buy at your local grocery or drug stores) and rubbing it over all surfaces of your hands until your hands feel dry and smooth (it should contain at least 60% alcohol)
- 36% of the people surveyed admit that they never or seldom wash their hands after coughing or sneezing; one of the most common ways people catch colds and flu is by rubbing their noses or eyes after touching someone or something that is contaminated with cold or flu viruses
- 31% admit they don’t always wash before eating lunch – that means money, door knobs and lunch counters could attract more germs than ants at a picnic !!
- 92% of Americans *said* they always wash their hands after using the bathroom, but a study done by SDA and the American Society for Microbiology proved that there is a major gap between what people say and what they do!! (In one study observing healthcare professionals attending a conference, doctors left the restrooms more often without washing their hands than the nurses or therapists who were attending the conference....)
- 31% of survey respondents wash their hands fewer than seven times in an average day

According to the CDC, clean hands are the single most important thing we can do to keep from getting sick and spreading illness to others... it’s also the easiest and

least expensive.... Compare the cost of soap and water to your last prescription for antibiotics....

Students from a Wisconsin middle school know about the health benefits of hand hygiene – “hands down”! They are the recipients of the 2006 Top Classroom Award from the “Healthy Schools, Healthy People – It’s a SNAP” national awards program. (Runners-up in the contest were schools in California and Florida.) SNAP – the School Network for Absenteeism Prevention – is a joint effort of CDC and SDA, to encourage middle schools to develop programs that make hand hygiene a priority for students, teachers, school administrators and parents. The kids scripted and taped a handwashing video for broadcast on the school’s closed circuit TV channel, as well as making signs which were posted in important handwash locations such as the school kitchen, restrooms, locker rooms and cafeteria. Kleenexes and bottles of hand sanitizer were distributed. The national SNAP initiative brings this important message to schools, where nearly 22 million school days are lost due to the common cold and where certain strains of *E.coli*, *Salmonella*, and other bacteria can live on surfaces like desks, tables and doorknobs for two hours or more!

So, when should I cleanse my hands?

- After using the bathroom
- After blowing my nose, sneezing, or coughing
- Before eating (or preparing) food and drinks
- After handling uncooked meat or other raw foods
- After taking out the trash
- After changing a diaper
- After handling money
- After playing with a pet, especially reptiles, iguanas or snakes (often carry *Salmonella* germs)

And, how do I properly wash my hands?

- Use warm running water to wet hands
- Lather hands with soap (liquid or bar soap)
- Rub hands together for at least 20 seconds, with special attention to skin folds between fingers, around and under nails, and cuticles
- Rinse well with warm water (soap left on your skin can cause chapping and cracking), lead to infection)
- Pat hands dry from fingertips to wrists
- *Then* turn off water, using a dry paper towel (touching a soiled faucet handle just puts the germs back on your skin!)

Teach others the clean-hands habit....

- Adults, set a good example for kids...
- Let staff in restaurants, day care centers, doctors’ and dentists’ offices, hospitals, and nursing homes know that you expect them to wash their hands before they provide your services – take time to thank them when you see them wash!

For more information, visit websites for CDC (www.cdc.gov), your state and local health departments, and www.coughsafe.com/media.html

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