



Frequently asked questions about Hand washing and Preventing Infection

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Why is cleaning your hands between patients important?

Many studies have shown that the bacteria that cause **nosocomial** (hospital-acquired) infections are most frequently spread from one patient to another on the hands of healthcare workers.

What is a nosocomial infection?

It's an infection that a patient acquires while in the hospital. An average of 7 percent to 10 percent of adult patients and as high as 30 percent of critically ill patients are infected. The most common infections are caused by **staphylococci** and **multi-drug resistant pathogens** such as **MRSA**, **VRE** and **resistant gram-negative rods**.

How do nosocomial infections impact patients?

Nearly 20,000 patients die each year as a direct result of these infections. They contribute to the deaths of another 80,000 patients. Patients can become ill with bloodstream infections, surgical site infections or urinary tract infections, and pneumonia.

How do nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers' get exposed to bacteria?

By doing simple tasks, like pulling patients up in bed, taking a blood pressure or pulse, or touching equipment like bedside rails, over bed tables, using or handling stethoscopes and IV pumps.

Does hand washing really reduce the spread of bacteria in healthcare settings?

Yes! A scientific study performed in a hospital nursery found that when nurses did not wash their hands between patient contacts, babies acquired **staphylococci bacteria** much more frequently than babies cared for by nurses who washed their hands between patient contacts with an **antimicrobial** soap.

Several other studies also show that washing hands between patient contacts reduces the spread of bacteria in healthcare settings.

How compliant are healthcare workers with hand washing recommendations?

Although hand washing has been proven to reduce the spread of **microorganisms** in healthcare facilities, healthcare workers often do not wash their hands when recommended. In 34 studies of hand washing, workers washed their hands only 40 percent of the time.

Why is compliance with recommended hand washing guidelines so poor?

There are a variety of reasons including heavy workloads, poor location of sinks, and skin irritation from soap.

How can we overcome problems associated with hand washing?

Since washing hands frequently with soap and water is inconvenient, time-consuming, and often causes skin irritation and dryness experts have suggested that hospitals, extended care facilities, and home health agencies develop new strategies for improving hand hygiene among healthcare workers.

We need to make it easier for you to clean your hands quickly, with a minimum of effort and skin irritation. One way to accomplish these goals is to clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand rub (a gel, rinse or foam).

Are alcohol-based hand rubs really effective?

More than 20 published studies have shown that alcohol-based hand rubs are much more effective than either plain soap or soap that kills germs in reducing the number of live bacteria on the hands of workers.

Won't frequent use of alcohol dry out my skin?

No! In fact, studies have proven that nurses who routinely cleaned their hands between patients by using a modern alcohol-based hand rub had less skin irritation and dryness than nurses who washed their hands with soap and water.

Modern alcohol-based hand rubs contain skin conditioners (emollients) that help prevent drying effects.

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