

Handwashing Fact Sheet

According to the CDC, the single most important thing we can do to keep from getting sick and spreading illness to others is to clean our hands.

Infectious diseases, many of which are spread by unclean hands, remain the leading cause of death and disease worldwide and the third-leading cause of death in the United States.

Washing hands with soap and clean water for 20 seconds is a sensible strategy for hand hygiene. If soap and clean water are not available, an alcohol-based hand hygiene product is recommended. However, when hands are visibly soiled, they should be washed with soap and water.

Colds

According to the CDC, there are more than 52 million cases of the common cold each year among Americans under the age of 17. Some viruses and bacteria can live from 20 minutes up to 2 hours or more on surfaces like cafeteria tables, doorknobs, and desks.

Children have about 6-10 colds a year, according to the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases. One important reason colds are so common in children is because they are often in close contact with each other in daycare centers and schools. Adults average 2-4 colds a year, although the range varies widely.

Flu

The CDC estimates that 10-20 percent of Americans come down with the flu during each flu season, which typically lasts from November to March. Children are two to three times more likely than adults to get the flu, and children frequently spread the virus to others. Although most people recover from flu, the CDC estimates that in the United States more than 100,000 people are hospitalized and about 36,000 people die from the flu and its complications each year.

Foodborne Illness

Failure to wash, or insufficiently washing hands, contributes to almost 50 percent of all foodborne illness outbreaks, says the CDC. Hands can also transfer germs from contaminated raw meat, eggs, and poultry to other foods.

Pets

All pet owners need to take adequate measures after handling and cleaning up after their pets, including proper hand washing. Dog and cat saliva can contain any of more than 100 different germs that can make you sick. The CDC has also found an increased number of salmonella infections associated with reptiles in both adults and children.