

Health Tips for Parents

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How important is handwashing?

Teaching your children good handwashing habits is one of the most important steps you can take to keep them healthy.



Keeping hands clean prevents the spread of germs that cause illness. "It's so simple and yet people often forget," says Lynn Ramirez, MD, assistant medical director of infection



prevention for Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. "Regular handwashing, along with vaccinations, are key to keeping your family safe."

How do germs spread?

Germs that cause illness, such as bacteria and viruses, can spread from person to person after their hands get contaminated with stool or respiratory secretions. Hands can become contaminated using the toilet or changing a diaper, but germs can spread in less obvious ways, such as handling raw meat, touching

someone who coughed or sneezed into their hands and touching doorknobs or toys.

Young children are particularly vulnerable. "When young children become ill with a respiratory illness, they stay infectious longer because they shed viruses longer than older children or adults," Dr. Ramirez says. They also are less likely to wash their hands.

How to encourage handwashing

Handwashing can be a fun activity for parents to share with their children and is a good habit for children to learn so they can take an active role in their own health. Parents can encourage children to wash their hands by teaching good handwashing techniques, reminding children to wash hands before and after activities likely to transmit germs and washing their own hands with their children.

How to wash

Handwashing seems like a simple task, but follow these steps to do it right:

- Wet hands with clean, running tap water. Warm or cold water is fine.
- Apply regular soap. Antibacterial soaps are not necessary in the home.
- Lather hands. Be sure to get the backs of your hands, between fingers and under nails.
- Scrub for 20 seconds—the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice.
- Rinse hands under clean running water.
- Dry hands with a clean towel or let them air dry.



When to use hand sanitizers

If you don't have soap and clean running water, hand sanitizers containing at least 60 percent alcohol can reduce the amount of germs on your hands in some situations, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hand sanitizers are not as effective as soap and water if your hands are dirty or greasy. Hand sanitizers work well against some germs, but handwashing with soap and water is best.

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood: Westwood, Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional. **Subscribe to Health Tips for Parents at uclahealth.org/enews.**