

## Your Skin

The skin is a barrier to protect the body from exposure to harmful irritants and disease-causing germs. Healthy skin is "intact" skin. This means the skin is free from nicks, cuts, scrapes, cracks, and rashes. Skin damage decreases the skin's ability to act as a protective barrier. Dry skin is susceptible to damage.

The biggest contributing factor to dry skin is the cold weather. Other factors that contribute to dry skin include living in locations that have low humidity levels, being over age 30, having poor nutrition or dietary needs that are not met, some medications, some medical conditions, frequent handwashing, and exposure to irritating chemicals.

It is important to prevent dry skin. Germs can attach more easily to dry skin, and open areas may allow entry of germs into our bodies. In spite of many factors beyond our control, some choices may help to keep our skin barrier intact:

- Wear gloves and warm clothing when it is cold
- Wash hands with warm, not hot, water.
- Pat skin dry, rather than rubbing.
- Wear protective gloves when handling chemicals or cleaning agents.
- Choose hand hygiene products that are dermatologist-tested for mildness.
- Use hand moisturizers often, preferably when skin is damp.
- Avoid leaving soap on hands, as it dries the skin.

## A Note About Fingernails

Thousands of germs can survive under and around fingernails. Be sure to clean areas under fingernails if they are visibly dirty, and pay special attention to these areas when you wash or use alcohol handrubs for cleaning hands. Freshly applied nail polish does not increase the numbers of germs present, but chipped nail polish may harbor germs. Persons with artificial nails are more likely to have more germs under and around nails than those who do not wear them.

## Treating Dry Skin

Sometimes, in spite of even the best preventive efforts, dry skin occurs. Symptoms of dry skin may include flaking, redness, itching, burning, or cracking. Treating dry skin early may prevent it from getting worse. Several ideas for treating dry skin include:

- **Add moisture to skin** by soaking in warm water, then applying lotions that contain water or humectants (ingredients such as glycerin that attract and hold moisture in the skin).
- **Wear light cotton gloves** for several hours or overnight after the above steps.
- **Barrier creams**, although not proven to prevent skin irritation, are sometimes used.

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Hand Hygiene  
for Consumers

**APIC**  
ASSOCIATION FOR PROFESSIONALS IN  
INFECTION CONTROL AND EPIDEMIOLOGY, INC.

# Hand Hygiene



## Background

Everyone has germs. Our bodies are covered with germs that help us to stay healthy. In addition to the germs that are usually present on our skin (**RESIDENT germs**), we also pick up germs from contact with other persons or objects in the environment. These types of germs, called **TRANSIENT germs**, are much easier to pick up and transfer. In this way, they can cause you, or others, to get sick.

Although people usually think that germs are spread through the air, the fact is that germs are most easily spread through **HAND CONTACT**.

One of the best ways to stop the spread of germs is to wash OR to decontaminate your hands. **HAND HYGIENE** is the newest term to describe washing or decontaminating hands.

**WASHING hands** helps to physically remove germs by friction, and to rinse them down the drain.

**DECONTAMINATING hands** reduces the amount of germs present on hands through use of special alcohol-containing preparations (handrubs), in the form of gels, rinses or foams.

While alcohol-containing preparations reduce germs on your hands, they cannot remove visible soil or contamination. It is always important to **WASH** hands any time they are visibly dirty. Alcohol-based preparations are a very effective way to decontaminate hands, if they are used appropriately.

## How To Wash Your Hands the Right Way

- If using a cloth towel to dry hands, have it close at hand before you start to wash.
- Wet hands with water.
- Apply soap to hands- lotion soap is best; germs can live on bar soap, but if used, it should be stored on a rack between uses.
- Rub hands vigorously together for **at least 15 seconds** (say the ABCs or sing "Row, Row, Row your Boat" to make sure you've washed long enough).
- Cover all surfaces of hands, fingers and thumbs.
- Rinse hands well to remove soap residue.
- Dry hands gently using soft paper towels; if using cloth towels, remember that damp towels may harbor germs.
- Use towel to turn off faucet.

## When to Wash Your Hands

Children and adults should wash with plain or antimicrobial soap:

- When hands are visibly dirty
- Before you eat
- Before you prepare food items
- After touching raw meats like chicken or beef
- After contact with any body fluids like blood, urine or vomit
- After changing infant or adult diapers
- After touching animals and pets
- After using the restroom
- After removing medical gloves

## How to Use Alcohol Handrubs

- Apply product to palm of one hand.
- Rub hands together.
- Cover all surfaces of hands and fingers.
- Rub **until** hands are dry.
- When using alcohol handrubs, you have used enough (about 1/2 tsp) if it takes 25-30 seconds to dry on your hands.

## When to Use Alcohol Handrubs

- For routine cleaning of hands anytime they are not visibly dirty
- If you have contact with contaminated objects in the environment
- Before and after you care for or have contact with someone who is very sick, very old or very young
- After touching other persons' intact skin (shaking hands, holding hands, especially when the other person has a cold or other illness)
- Whenever you want to decontaminate hands

## My Hands are Dry – Won't Alcohol Sting or Make Them Drier?

- Choose alcohol handrubs containing 60-95% alcohol, listed as ingredients isopropyl, ethanol or n-propanol.
- Choose alcohol handrubs with 1-3% glycerol or other skin conditioning agents, as emollients.
- Emollients are added to alcohol handrubs to restore moisture to the skin.
- Alcohol-based handrubs, rinses or gels containing emollients cause **MUCH LESS** skin irritation and dryness than plain or antimicrobial soaps.
- It is **NOT** necessary, or recommended, to routinely wash hands after application of alcohol-based handrubs.
- Do not wipe off alcohol handrubs. Let hands air dry.
- Use of antimicrobial handwipes is considered equivalent to handwashing; **BUT** they are not as effective in killing germs as using alcohol handrubs.
- When used on dry or chafed skin, alcohol may cause a temporary stinging effect, but if products are chosen carefully, the chance of this is decreased.