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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Hand Hygiene and Preventing Infection

This information explains how to clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

## Why is hand hygiene so important?

When germs get into your body, they can cause an infection. Everyone is at risk for an infection while in the hospital. Hand hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of germs and infections. It only takes 20 seconds of washing your hands or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (such as Purell®) to kill the germs that cause infections. You can take action by cleaning your hands and asking your visitors to clean their hands.

## When should I clean my hands with soap and water?

- After using the toilet, urinal, or bedside commode.
- If your hands look dirty.
- Before you eat or prepare food.
- If you have an infection with the germ *Clostridium difficile* (*C. diff*) or norovirus.
- After vomiting (throwing up) or coughing up phlegm (mucus).

# What is the correct way to clean my hands with soap and water?

1. Wet your hands with warm water. Use liquid soap, if possible. Apply enough soap to cover both of your hands.
2. Rub your hands together until a lather forms. Rub the lather over the top of your hands, between your fingers, and in the area around and under your fingernails.
3. Keep rubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds.
4. Rinse your hands well under warm running water.
5. Dry your hands with a paper towel.
6. Use a dry paper towel to turn off the faucet and to open the bathroom door, if needed.



Please visit [www.mskcc.org/videos/how-wash-your-hands-properly](http://www.mskcc.org/videos/how-wash-your-hands-properly) to watch this video.

## When should I clean my hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer?

- If soap and water aren't available.
- When you leave your hospital room and when you come back.
- Before eating.

If you can't get out of bed, you can use an individually packaged hand wipe.

# What is the correct way to clean my hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer?

1. Apply enough sanitizer to cover both of your hands.
2. Rub your hands together, and then rub the sanitizer over the top of your hands, between your fingers, and in the area around and under your fingernails.
3. Keep rubbing until your hands are dry. If enough sanitizer was used to kill germs, it should take at least 20 seconds of rubbing before your hands feel dry. Don't rinse your hands with water or dry them with a towel.

# Where can I get more information about hand hygiene?

If you have questions, talk with your doctor or nurse. You can also visit the following website for more information:

## **World Health Organization (WHO)**

[www.who.int/gpsc/5may/Hand\\_Hygiene\\_When\\_and\\_How\\_Leaflet.pdf](http://www.who.int/gpsc/5may/Hand_Hygiene_When_and_How_Leaflet.pdf)

# When to Call Your Healthcare Provider

Call your healthcare provider if you have any of the following:

- A fever of 100.4° F (38° C) or higher
- A temperature of 96.8° F (36° C) or lower
- New or worsening chills or sweating
- New or worsening redness around a wound
- New or increased drainage from a wound
- New or worsening shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- A heartbeat that is faster than usual
- New or worsening cough

- New or worsening pain

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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