



Handwashing hygiene

for children ages 2-5

Why do we wash our hands?

- 80% of common infections are spread through touch. We most often get sick by eating or touching our face after we have been in contact with a surface that had germs on it.
- Handwashing is the best way to stop the spread of germs that cause common childhood infections such as the common cold, the flu (influenza virus) or the stomach flu (gastroenteritis).
- The lather created by soap removes the germs on our hands that make us sick.
- Washing hands not only prevents you from getting sick but also reduces the risk of infecting people around you. When you do not wash your hands, you can infect others with the germs on your hands, even if you do not feel sick. Learn more about [how common childhood infections spread](#).



It is important to teach kids **other ways we can stop spreading germs**. Remind kids to cough and sneeze into their elbow or a tissue.

How to teach handwashing to your children

- As children become more independent, they might want to wash their hands alone. It is important to observe your child and show them how to wash their hands.
- Find activities to make handwashing fun. Sing a song or colour pictures of the steps to wash hands and keep it near the sink. [Handwashing activities for children](#).
- Toddlers love to ask, "Why?" including why we wash hands and why germs make us sick. Reading books about germs can help kids get excited about handwashing. [Children's books on handwashing](#).
- Help toddlers reach the sink and keep a towel within reach. Use anything stable as a stool or lift your child up to the sink and towel height.





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How do we wash our hands?

1. Wet your hands

- Water can be warm or cold. Choose a temperature comfortable for you to rinse for long enough.

2. Apply soap

- Plain soap is best. The lather from soap will remove the bad germs when rinsed.
- Antimicrobial soaps can promote antibiotic resistance and are not recommended. These are soaps with ingredients like Triclosan.
- Bar soap needs to be well drained between uses. Try setting it on top of old chopsticks or pot scrubbers.

3. Rub hands with soap for at least 20 seconds

- Encourage children to make as many bubbles with soap as they can.
- Germs are only removed if we wash hands for long enough. To encourage kids to do so, try singing, “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” or the “Happy Birthday,” song twice.
- Wash all parts of your hands. Commonly missed areas include under nails, between fingers and the wrists.

4. Rinse with water

- It is important to rinse hands for at least 10 seconds.
- When in a public washroom, use paper towel or your elbow to turn off the tap.

5. Dry hands

- Drying your hands removes 42% more germs than washing hands without drying them after.
- The friction from drying hands with a towel removes germs from the hands.



[Video to teach children how to wash their hands.](#)

When do we wash our hands?

- Before eating
- After you finish sharing toys or crayons with other children
- After going to the washroom
- After playing outside
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After cleaning up a child who has used the toilet
- After re-entering the home from public places like school or grocery stores





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Common questions about handwashing

1. Is using water alone to wash hands as effective as using soap?

The lather and bubbles created from plain soap is what removes the bad germs on our hands. Water might remove visible dirt, food or paint, but it will not remove the germs that we cannot see. Households that use only water to wash hands can get ill with diarrhea and pneumonia twice as often.

2. Is it unhealthy to let my child play with dirty hands?

It can be confusing to understand how much is too much handwashing. Parents might hear about the importance of allowing children to get dirty and play outside. This is true. Our bodies do need good germs that keep us healthy. We get these from people, animals and the natural world. However, it is the bad germs that cause disease that we try to stop from entering our bodies by handwashing. Allow your children to touch dirt and mud or play with pets. Let children stay dirty for as long as the play lasts or until it is time to eat or go to the bathroom. Then, wash hands. Parents can find more [information about the balance of getting dirty and staying clean](#).

3. Are hand sanitizers safe and effective for children?

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are safe for children to use. Hand sanitizers can be used when out at a playground, on the school bus or any time soap and water is not available. It is an effective substitute for handwashing if hands are not visibly dirty. Products need to be at least 60% alcohol to be effective. Children should not put their hands in their mouth until hands are completely dry as the liquid is toxic if swallowed. Find more [information on the most effective use of hand sanitizer](#).

More resources

Recommended parent's websites:

1. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
2. [Caring for Kids - Canadian Pediatric Society](#)
3. [Vancouver Coastal Health - Sneezes and Diseases](#)

Recommended children's books:

1. [Germs Are Not for Sharing by Elizabeth Verdick](#)
2. [Wash Your Hands! by Tony Ross](#)
3. [Farm Flu by Teresa Bateman](#)
4. [Bear Feels Sick by Karma Wilson](#)
5. [A Germ's Journey: Dirty Hands! Clean Hands! by Katie Laird, Sarah Younie](#)



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