

Flu Prevention Tips

Handwashing helps prevent the spread of flu

The shortage of flu vaccine this year is making us think twice about the impending flu season. Without a flu shot, will we get the flu? How bad will it be? Will we spread it to others?

Luckily, we can follow a number of practices that will reduce our chances of getting the flu and spreading it to others. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, next to getting a flu shot, the single most important thing you can do to prevent the spread of infection is to wash your hands. In the hospital, this means washing your hands between patients or before visits to patients. In the home, it means washing your hands before preparing food, after changing diapers, after using the bathroom and after sneezing, blowing your nose, rubbing your eyes or smoking.

It seems we know we should be washing our hands, but aren't actually doing it. For example, in one nationwide study, 94 percent of consumers surveyed said they always washed their hands after using the restroom. However, observers planted in public restrooms in five major cities found that only 68 percent, in fact, did so. Women were somewhat more likely than men to wash up (74 percent versus 61 percent), but neither group came close to doing what they said they did.

In a study reported in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases in Children*, fecal coliforms were detected on the hands of some 20 percent of the day-care staff evaluated. Further, one-third of the facilities studied had poor handwashing systems and no policy for handwashing before eating or after playing outside.

The CDC recommends vigorous scrubbing with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds, then rinsing with clear water and drying with a clean towel. Any type of soap will do. It's not necessary to use anti-bacterial soap. In fact, the American Academy of Microbiology warns against widespread use of anti-microbial products as they are likely to lead to the development of more resistant bacteria.

In addition to regular handwashing, a number of other practices will help keep us healthy, resistant to infection and less likely to spread disease. These include:

- Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, which are important sources of antioxidants to help strengthen immune function.
- Get plenty of exercise. Regular exercise also helps boost the immune system so you are better prepared to fend off infections.
- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated and help flush toxins from the body.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.
- When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from also getting sick. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. If possible, stay home from work, school and errands until you're no longer contagious.
- If you are not able to get a flu shot, consider getting the nasal-spray flu vaccine. This vaccine is made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu and is approved for use in healthy people ages 5 to 49 and women who are not pregnant.

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