

HAND WASHING: AN IMPORTANT PREVENTIVE HEALTH HABIT

Although the washing of hands seems like a little thing, it can have a powerful impact on managing the spread of infectious disease. According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), hand washing is considered the *single most important* means of preventing the spread of infection.

Everyday we come into contact with germs from a variety of sources-direct contact with people, contaminated surfaces, food, animals, and animal waste. When we don't wash our hands or wash them properly, we greatly increase the risk of spreading germs to other people, as well as to ourselves by touching our eyes, mouth, and nose. One of the most common ways to catch a cold or the flu is by rubbing the nose and eyes with hands that have been contaminated. Beyond these common illnesses, poor hand hygiene can be a contributor to potentially serious illnesses such as hepatitis, meningitis, infectious diarrhea, and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Inadequate hand hygiene also contributes to food-related illnesses such as salmonella and Escherichia coli (E. coli.). According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the CDC, transmission of pathogenic bacteria, viruses, and parasites from raw food or from ill people to food by way of improperly washed hands, continues to be one of several major factors in the spread of food-borne illnesses. Reportedly, 76 million Americans contract a food-borne illness each year, and of these, about 5,000 die as a result of their illness. Others experience nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

It is important to wash your hands *often*, particularly anytime you think you have exposed them to bacteria or viruses. The CDC recommends washing of hands:

- Before preparing or eating food.
- After going to the bathroom.
- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has gone to the bathroom.
- Before and after tending to someone who is sick.
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- After handling an animal or animal waste.
- After handling garbage.
- Before and after treating a cut or wound.

Equally important as when to wash your hands, is how to wash your hands. The CDC offers these guidelines for washing with soap and water:

- Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds.

- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use your paper towel to turn off the faucet.

For those times soap and water is not easily accessible, keep an alcohol-based hand sanitizer handy-car, purse, briefcase, desk, especially if you spend a great deal of time in public areas, e.g. trains, buses, subways.

- Apply product to the palm of one hand.
- Rub hands together.
- Rub the product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry.

If you take a moment to think about all the things you touch each day and how many people may have touched them before you, you might want to consider heading straight to the sink to wash your hands! Hand washing is a simple act that doesn't take much time or effort and it is one of the most important steps we can take in keeping ourselves-and others-healthy.

Submitted by Joe Thomas, Safety Officer for Tompkins Construction