

Recommendations on Hand Hygiene in Schools

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Medical Officers of Health, New Brunswick

If done properly, hand hygiene is one of the most important things anyone can do to avoid communicable diseases. Hand hygiene refers to a process for the removal of both dirt and germs from the hands. This can be accomplished by hand washing with soap and water or by using an alcohol based hand sanitizer. There is often debate over which is the preferred option in a given situation.

Some key points regarding hand hygiene:

- Hand hygiene is an important life skill that should be taught and practiced regularly throughout the day. To increase hand hygiene compliance and quality, there must be adequate access to sinks and hand hygiene supplies (ie, running water, soap, hand drying facilities) and no barriers to their use.
- Hand washing and hand sanitizers are not equivalent in all situations. Education is important to ensure that users possess the ability to determine the appropriate times and conditions for using these two alternatives. Hand washing should be promoted as the usual first choice, with use of hand sanitizers limited to certain situations (as follow up to hand washing, when there is no visible soiling of the hands, and where hand washing facilities are not readily available such as entrances to buildings, reception areas).
- The provision of hand sanitizers, in some cases, may discourage proper hand washing (such as placement in kitchens or washrooms). Careful consideration of the placement of sanitizer stations relative to hand washing facilities is therefore essential.

For either hand washing or hand sanitizing, proper procedure is essential:

Hand washing – key steps include using warm water *and soap*, scrubbing all hand surfaces (including nails, sides of fingers, wrists) for *about 20 seconds* (sing through “Happy Birthday” twice), rinsing and drying thoroughly. Use the towel to turn off the tap to avoid recontaminating your hands. It is the soap and vigorous motion that physically removes dirt and bacteria.

Hand sanitizers – key steps include applying a loonie sized amount of (60-90%) *alcohol-based* product and rubbing all hand surfaces (including nails, sides of fingers, wrists) *until they are dry (about 20 seconds)*. If hands are dry sooner, you may not have applied enough sanitizer. The alcohol directly kills bacteria on the surface of hands.

Hand washing versus sanitizing:

Hand sanitizers can be less effective than hand washing in certain situations. Visible dirt, grease, food or other contaminants present on hands significantly lowers the effectiveness of the alcohol. As a result, situations in which the use of hand washing should be promoted as the first choice include any circumstance where visible soiling can occur, such as: when preparing food, after using the washroom, after contact with bodily fluids (especially vomit, diarrhea; also nasal discharge, saliva, sputum), and after contact with animals or garbage.

In areas where hand washing facilities are not readily available, such as reception areas, entrances to buildings, and areas where people meet and greet, alcohol-based sanitizers are appropriate. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can quickly reduce the number of germs on hands in such situations, but sanitizers do not eliminate all types of germs.

Links:

<http://www.cpha.ca/en/portals/idp/hygiene.aspx>

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/hands-mains-eng.php>

<http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/>