The Best Illness Prevention: Hand Washing

Do you always wash your hands after using the bathroom or handling pets? Almost everyone says they wash their hands in these situations, but studies show that only about two out of three people actually do.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that washing your hands is the most important — and easiest — thing you can do to keep from getting sick and from passing your germs to others.

Passing Germs
Germs that cause colds, flu and some serious illnesses, such as hepatitis A, meningitis and infectious diarrhea, spread easily when an infected person touches surfaces that other people touch. When you touch an infected surface, you pick up germs on your hands, and you can infect yourself by touching your eyes, nose or mouth. You can also pass the germs on to anything or anyone else you touch.

And when cooks don’t wash their hands after handling raw meat and poultry, they can spread foodborne bacteria, such as salmonella, campylobacter and E. coli, to kitchen surfaces, utensils and other food. When you eat tainted food, you can get a bad case of food poisoning.

By washing your hands, you eliminate the germs and stop the spread of illness. Plain soap and water do a good job of washing away germs. Antibacterial or antimicrobial soaps actually kill germs as they’re washed away. Both types of soap are effective when hand washing is performed correctly.

Eliminating Germs
The kitchen and the bathroom are the most dangerous rooms, germwise, in the house. You should almost always wash your hands before leaving them.

Other times you should wash your hands include:
- Before, during and after preparing food — especially after handling raw meat or poultry
- Before and after eating
- After using the bathroom
- After changing a baby’s diaper
- After handling pets
- After spending time in a public place
- When your hands are dirty
- After coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose
- Before and after touching cuts, burns or infected wounds
- Before, during and after interacting with someone who is sick.

Proper Hand Washing Technique
Many people don’t wash their hands properly. Here are some steps for proper washing, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
- Use a clean and dry bar soap, or use a liquid soap. Wet your hands, and apply soap.
- Rub your hands vigorously for at least 15 seconds. Don’t forget to scrub between your fingers and around your nails.
- Rinse your hands well.
- Dry with a clean towel.
- Use a towel (or paper towel) to turn off the water faucet.

Getting Kids to Wash
Getting kids to wash up can be especially difficult. Here are some tips for encouraging proper hand washing in the younger set:
- Teach children to wash at “important” times during the day — after using the bathroom or touching diapers, before and after meals and snacks, after returning home or coming in from outdoors, and before and after handling infants.
- Teach children to use soap, not water alone. Use fun soap — from a pump, with bright colors or special scents.
- Use instant hand sanitizers when away from home. It can be fun for children to wash without water.
- Sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” to time hand washing.
- Encourage children to use their own towels, either a special towel at home or a clean paper towel away from home.

For more information, visit http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/handwashing.htm