

Preventing the Spread of Infections in Schools

Hand Hygiene: Spread Protection... Not Infection

This PSHSA Fast Fact is intended to promote the use of effective hand hygiene techniques for everyone working in the educational sector.

What is Hand Hygiene and Why Is It Important?

Hand hygiene is a general term that applies to hand-washing and the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers. Many viruses and some bacterial infections such as pink eye are spread by hands. Touching people, objects, or surfaces that are contaminated with the virus or bacteria puts you at risk for getting the infection. If you become sick you can transmit the infection to others and contaminate the environment with your hands. This cycle is referred to as the “chain of transmission” and the simplest and most effective method to break this chain is with the use of proper hand hygiene.

When Should I Use Hand Hygiene?

- when your hands are visibly soiled
- before handling food and/or eating or smoking
- frequently during communicable disease outbreaks and cold and flu season; especially after touching/handling “high touch” objects such as door knobs, computer keyboards and pencil sharpeners
- after personal functions such as using the washroom or blowing your nose
- after close contact with potentially infectious people and/or their immediate environment
- after handling any soiled object or material
- after removal of protective gloves

What about Gloves?

Disposable protective gloves should be worn when there is a risk of hands being exposed to blood or body fluid. For example, during first aid procedures and any body fluid spill cleanup procedure.

How to Wash Your Hands in Six Steps

1. Wet your hands with warm water.
2. Apply liquid soap from a dispenser.
3. Rub your hands together for 15 seconds, making sure to cover all surfaces of your hands and fingers.
4. Rinse your hands well and dry them with a paper towel.
5. Use the towel to turn off the tap and to handle the doorknob (when possible).
6. Discard the used towel in a waste receptacle.

When Should I Use Alcohol-based Hand Sanitizers?

When water and soap are not available for hand-washing alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be used. A concentration of greater than 60% alcohol is recommended.

Several well documented studies have shown that alcohol based hand sanitizers are very effective and convenient to use. However, soap and water should be used either alone or prior to using alcohol-based hand sanitizer when hands are visibly soiled.

For more information refer to the CHICA Canada website for hand hygiene resources http://www.chica.org/links_handhygiene.html

The Three-step Technique

1. Apply the alcohol-based product to the palm of one hand (read the label for instructions on the amount to apply).
2. Rub your hands together making sure to cover all surfaces of your hands and fingers.
3. Rub until your hands are dry.

Maintaining Healthy Skin and Nails

Your skin acts as a barrier to disease, but only if it is intact. Frequent hand-washing can sometimes leave your skin and nails dry and cracked, allowing germs to easily enter. To keep your skin and nails healthy:

- Treat broken skin on hands promptly
- Use moisturizing hand-care products regularly
- Wear protective gloves when appropriate
- Keep your nails short and clean
- Do not wear artificial nails; make sure nail polish is not chipped
- Keep jewelry worn on your hands to a minimum, e.g., watch and ring
- Dry your hands thoroughly and gently after washing to prevent chapped hands
- Wear outdoor gloves in cold weather

Need More Information?

Talk to your supervisor, the local Public Health Department, joint health and safety committee, or your union.

Refer to the PSHSA website, www.pshsa.ca, for links to infection prevention and control resources.