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Not Washing Up

Hygiene, from the Greek *hugieine* ‘art of health,’ are the conditions and practices conducive to maintaining health and preventing disease, especially through cleanliness. So, you ask, “Why do I need to wash my hands after going to the bathroom?” The answer is germs.

Hand washing is simple and when done correctly, it’s one of the best ways to stay healthy. All that’s required is soap and warm water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. But even as easy as it is, many people don’t wash their hands as often as they should, even after using the bathroom.

Not to be too melodramatic, but germs are everywhere. You get them on your hands from things you touch. Once the germs are on your hands, all you have to do is touch your eyes, nose, or mouth to expose yourself to them and get sick. And you can spread the germs to other people by touching them or by touching surfaces they touch, like door handles, stall doors in public bathrooms, faucet handles, and flush levers of all shapes and sizes.

Everything from colds to infectious diarrhea is spread through hand-to-hand contact. Food-related illnesses, like salmonella and E. coli infection, are also spread when people don’t keep their hands clean. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as many as 76 million Americans get a food-borne illness each year resulting in nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. About 5,000 of these people die as a direct result of their illness.

Makes you think. What did you touch today—maybe your friend’s cell phone (which he handed you right after he sneezed into his hand), the toilet seat at the movie theater, or your cat’s pooper-scooper when you cleaned out his litter box? Maybe you picked your nose? (You wouldn’t do that, would you?). You get the picture. Whatever you do, you come into contact with germs, and it’s easy for germs *on* your hands to end up *in* you.

And just to prove that most misery is self-inflicted, Harris Interactive® conducted a study of hand washing habits for the American Society for

Microbiology (ASM) and The Soap and Detergent Association (SDA).ⁱ They looked at 6,336 people who used the public bathrooms at six public attractions in four major cities: Atlanta (Turner Field), Chicago (Museum of Science and Industry, Shedd Aquarium), New York City (Grand Central Station, Penn Station), and San Francisco (Ferry Terminal Farmers Market). Here are the results:

- When asked, 96% of men said they always washed their hands after using public restrooms, but just 75% were seen doing so.
- 83% said they washed their hands after using the bathroom at home.

These statistics lead us to conclude that people believe their personal urine and excrement are somehow different than other people's urine and excrement—that people think their germs are cleaner than other people's germs. They're not.

And in a separate telephone survey of 1,013 American adults, the ASM found that:

- 68% don't wash their hands after coughing or sneezing. Think about that the next time your buddy hands you a pizza slice after sneezing a few times.
- 58% don't wash their hands after petting a dog or cat. You've seen your cat roll around in his litter box, right? Need we say more?
- 79% don't wash up after handling money. Ever wonder where that \$5 bill's been?
- And our personal favorite: 27% don't wash their hands after changing a baby's diaper. If you've never taken on this daunting task, try it and you'll know why this statistic is so remarkable (in a bad way).

It all sounds grim. But, don't forget your body has an immune system that takes care of most germs to which you're exposed. Trouble is, it doesn't get them all. That's why proper and frequent hand washing is so important.

Not Washing Up Dos and Don'ts

- In public bathrooms, turn off the water with a paper towel to avoid getting germs on your clean hands. Use the same towel to open the door. Door handles are great carriers of germs.
- Use a hand-sanitizing wipe or gel when you can't wash up with soap and water.

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ⁱ American Society for Microbiology, press release, September 21, 2005