

Clean Hands Save Lives

Posted by [petehurrey](#) On 12/19/2008

Wintertime is a season of family gatherings, food, gifts and a lot of sneezes and sniffles. During this time of togetherness, paying attention to hand hygiene and overall cleanliness may save lives.

Scientists estimate that 80 percent of infections are transmitted through hands, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Hand washing is one of the simplest and easiest ways to prevent infection," said John Kees, infection control preventionist at St. Mary's Hospital. "It's 15 seconds; 15 seconds of your time may prevent a week's worth of bed rest or antibiotics."

Check out these tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on how to keep the germs away.

- Avoid sneezing into your hands because they hold contaminants. Instead, sneeze into your elbow.

- When washing your hands, turn on the water first, wet your hands and apply soap. Lather your hands and wash for about 15 to 20 seconds — this is approximately the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice. Make sure to clean both sides of the hands, the fingernails and between each finger. Dry your hands and use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the bathroom door.

- Between washings, use a hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol content. This will not remove dirt and debris so make sure to wash hands with soap and water before handling food.

- Clean and disinfect surfaces regularly to avoid contamination. This is especially important when cooking raw meat. Make sure to not only clean with soap and water to remove the dirt, but also to use a disinfectant to kill germs.

- Practice four simple steps when it comes to food preparation:
 - Clean hands and kitchen surfaces

 - Separate food — don't cross-contaminate food

 - Cook to proper temperatures

 - Chill food promptly

- Make sure to use antibiotics as prescribed and do not abuse their use — unnecessary antibiotics can be harmful.

- Animals can carry germs that can cause illness. Make sure to wash your hands after contact with animals and their waste.

For more information on how you can protect your family and home, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site at www.cdc.gov.

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