

“Wash your hands frequently or use a hand sanitizer” – what does this actually mean for you?

14th March 2020

Current UK government strategy is to delay the spread of COVID-19 infection to ensure that we have sufficient health service capacity to give those who become seriously ill the medical care that they need. Regardless of whether you are in “self isolation” to ensure that you do not spread the infection to others, or because you belong to a “vulnerable group” and have greater need to avoid infection, or whether you are trying to lead a “normal” life, hand hygiene is one of the key measures - to prevent you from becoming infected, and equally importantly to stop you passing it on to others.

The aim of this advice sheet is to help you understand what “wash your hands frequently” means in practice – and how to ensure that you don’t make things worse by practicing excessive hand hygiene where you don’t need to and ending up with skin irritation

Why is good hand hygiene so important?

At the present time it is assumed that the key routes of transmission from person to person are:

Droplet transmission when an infected person sprays droplets of infected mucous by coughing or sneezing, which enters the eye, mouth or nostrils of an uninfected person. This transmission route requires close contact (being within 2 metres or 6 steps) between the infected and uninfected individuals.

Contact transmission via hands and hand contact surfaces become contaminated by settling of airborne droplets or being touched with contaminated fingers. An individual can pick up the virus if they touch a contaminated surface or shake hands with an infected individual with contaminated hands. They can become infected if they rub their eyes or the lining of their nose or their mouth with contaminated hands.

Surfaces most likely to spread droplets of infected mucous shed from the nose are surfaces frequently touched by other people such as tap and door handles, telephones, mobile devices, television remotes etc. The virus can survive up to 72 h



on some types of surfaces, although infectivity (and the infection risk) declines significantly after about 3-4h.

Note: COVID-19 can only “breed” inside human or animal cells, it cannot “breed” on your hands or environmental surfaces or in the toilet or washbasin – or on a toilet seat – it’s just using them to get from one person to another. You cannot get rid of the virus by e.g deep cleaning your home – but you can prevent the spread of infection through good hand hygiene – at the key moments when it is most likely to be spreading.

Your hands are what we call “the last line of defence.” Having the virus on your hands is no problem, you only become infected if you touch your mouth, nose or eyes with contaminated fingers

What does washing hands frequently or using a hand sanitizer mean?

Regardless of whether you are in self isolation or not, and particularly when you are out and about in crowded places, the advice is:

- Wash your hands frequently or use a hand sanitizer*.

It is impossible to define exactly what is meant by “frequently”, but there are certain times when it is obvious. e.g. as soon as you get to work or arrive home – and other times when you have to work it out for yourself. The following are the easy examples of key times to practice good hand hygiene,

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- after coughing and sneezing (but don’t forget to block these as much as possible)
- when you arrive at your destination (e.g. work, school, university)
- immediately when you return home after work, shopping, (put a note by the door to remind yourself – “Wash your hands”)
- after using the toilet (if we are infected we may shed the virus in our faeces)
- before handling ready to eat foods and before eating with your fingers (including ANY snack you pick up whilst on the go)

But there are other times when it’s less obvious. One of these is when you have been touching surfaces frequently touched by others e.g.

- when you are at home, be aware of when you are touching surfaces that are frequently touched by other people. This includes shared computer keyboards, TV remotes, telephones, kettle handles, door handles tap handles, toilet seats and flush handles etc. It could be helpful to make sure that high frequency touch surfaces are disinfected at least daily with a suitable disinfectant product or wipe that kills viruses^{**,*} or if this is not possible (e.g the surface or object would be damaged) avoid touching the surface at all, if possible.



- When on the go, if you are travelling in an aeroplane or train, you can wash your hands whilst you are in the toilet – but you will be touching surfaces touched by other people whilst returning to your seat. For this reason carrying a hand sanitizer with you at all times is a good idea. It means you can practice good hand hygiene when you need to even if you do not have access to soap and running water.
- The mobile phone or tablet is probably the most touched item. Be aware, if you have it in your hands whilst you are on the go. At the same time that you practice hand hygiene you should also disinfect your phone ***

But remember

- You can't get infected just by touching a contaminated surface. This can only happen if you touch your mouth eyes and nose. So avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth as much as you can. This is very difficult because we tend to do this all the time without realising

Which should I choose - handwashing with soap – or using an alcohol hand sanitizer?

- Hand washing with soap and using an alcohol hand sanitizer are equally effective provided you wash your hands or use the hand sanitizer in the “proper way” (see below)
- If you are at home or in a place where you have easy access to soap, running water and a towel or hand dryer at the moment you need it, use hand washing with soap.
- Handwashing with soap and water saves on hand sanitizer, which is currently in short supply. Save the sanitizer for when you are out and do not have access to wash basin.
- If your hands get very dry, use a moisturising hand cream at night-time to allow your skin to recover. Hand cream can make your hands moist unless it dries quickly, so applying it when you are not going to touch anything makes sense.

Don't panic and don't overdo it

- In this advice sheet, we have tried to concentrate on the most important times when you should practice hand hygiene – if you try to focus on these times this will give you maximum protection against getting infected or spreading infection
- We are aware that there are a lot of “but what if ---” situations. In these situations it comes down to using common sense - and remembering that there is no such thing as zero risk
- Be aware that if you overdo hand hygiene, particularly when it comes to using an alcohol hand sanitizer, you could cause skin irritation problems



How to wash or sanitize your hands

There are utube clips to show you how to [wash your hands](#) or use a [alcohol hand sanitizer](#)

Disinfectants and hand sanitizers

***Waterless hand sanitizers** (also called hand rubs) which are effective in inactivating respiratory viruses on the hands include alcohol-based gels (or other products) containing not less than 62% v/v alcohol. Not all hand products are effective against viruses, so check the label. Confusingly some alcohol hand gels are labelled ““antibacterial” hand sanitizers/gels”, but are effective against viruses provided they contain 62-70%v/v alcohol. By contrast, most or all products labelled as “antibacterial hand soaps” are not effective against viruses. Do not be fooled by alcoholic drinks; a proof reading of 80 is only 40% v/v alcohol.

****Disinfectants and disinfectant cleaners** – If you use a disinfectant, (disinfectant, disinfectant/cleaner, disinfectant spray or wipe) use a product such as a bleach-based product, which is active against respiratory viruses. Check the claims on the label to be sure. To use bleach (hypochlorite) products as a surface disinfectant, the recommended concentration is 0.5% w/v or 5000 ppm available chlorine. Household bleach (both thick and thin bleach) for domestic use typically contains between 2.5 and 4.5% w/v (25,000-45,000 ppm) available chlorine. Unfortunately, the strength is quite often not stated on the back of the pack which makes it difficult. If this is the case It is suggested that you assume that the concentration is 3.5% w/v available chlorine and do a 1 in 15 dilution. Bleach/cleaner formulations such as sprays or wipes are formulated to be used “neat” (i.e. without dilution).

*****alcohol wipes** – containing 70%v/v alcohol are useful for disinfecting “delicate” or small surfaces.

UK Government advice on self isolation can be found at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-people-with-confirmed-or-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

The International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene (IFH, www.ifh-homehygiene.org) is a not-for-profit educational trust which is working to develop and promote hygiene in home and everyday life based on sound scientific evidence

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