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Protecting our health and the NHS - 'Tis the season to practise good Hygiene

As we face the likelihood of another difficult winter, practising good hygiene in our homes and everyday lives in public spaces will be vital to deal with the combination of threats posed by influenza, higher than usual levels of Group A Streptococcus, a possible further wave of COVID-19 and the winter-vomiting norovirus outbreaks.



Not only is this important to protect the NHS (including protecting against ward closures due to norovirus outbreaks), it will also reduce absenteeism from work, schools and day care, thereby protecting incomes, already under threat through the cost of living crisis.

Getting the public to adopt effective hygiene is important, not only short term, but as an integral part of national and international initiatives to build

greater resilience to future health threats [1] including the possibility of future pandemics and tackling antibiotic resistance by reducing antibiotic prescribing [2]. This is addressed in a document prepared by The UK Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) together with the International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene (IFH), (released 20th December) which evaluates these issues and sets out constructive policy recommendations for change. [3]

The report sets out some of the results of a poll carried out in England (April 2022) by the RSPH and IFH in April 2022 has shown how the pandemic has shifted public opinions on the importance of hygiene, putting us in a much better position to achieve this, as compared with January 2020. The poll showed that 77-83% agreed that Covid-19 has shown them why practising good hygiene is important, that they had made a big effort during the pandemic to follow government advice and practise better hygiene and that they intend to continue to make greater effort to practise good hygiene. Interestingly, **70%** of people believe that adopting hygiene behaviours to reduce transmission of infectious diseases is as important as changing behaviours to reduce climate change.

However, whilst this reaction is encouraging, the poll showed significant shortcomings in public understanding of how hygiene differs from cleanliness and how to practice effective, time-efficient hygiene. Whilst government Covid-19 advice focussed on “wash your hands frequently” and “how to wash them properly”, it gave insufficient guidance on when and why we need to do this; people, misled by myths and misunderstandings, reported practising hand and surface hygiene in

situations where it would be time-consuming, resource intensive and have little, or even a negative impact:

- Almost a third of people (31%) mistakenly believed they could be infected by the virus penetrating the skin of their hands.
- 59% believed wearing gloves is an effective way to reduce Covid.
- 57% said “If someone in my home has Covid-19, the house needs to be deep cleaned to get rid of the virus”.
- 49% said “Since the pandemic I have started using antibacterial cleaner when cleaning my home”.

Inability to distinguish risk surfaces such as hand contact surfaces, from environmental surfaces which are rarely touched and pose little risk, is unsurprising in view of the media images of public health workers spraying surfaces in public places, mistakenly believing this makes the venue Covid-secure. Glove-wearing and excessive use of cleaning products where they have little hygiene benefit is wholly incompatible with the drive towards sustainable use of these products.

To take advantage of heightened awareness to get the public to adopt hygiene behaviour which is effective and sustainable, IFH has developed a framework known as Targeted Hygiene. [4] This is aimed at supporting government and public health agencies in providing clearer and more effective practical guidance. It is a simple approach that starts by identifying the 9 key moments in our daily lives **WHEN** hygiene is important (e.g. handling raw foods, using the toilet), and the places **WHERE** we need to act at that moment (hands, surfaces etc). Thirdly it identifies **HOW** to practice hygiene (handwashing, surface cleaning, mask wearing etc). Rather than giving prescriptive guidance that needs to be memorized, Targeted Hygiene is communicated through visual content which engages the public by setting it out in the way we experience it in our daily lives.



This winter will be difficult for many reasons, but, when it comes to hygiene, it will also be different. Whilst we no longer need to comply with “life limiting” behaviours vital to fight a single, highly infectious, virus, it is also vital that we adapt what we have learned

from Covid-19 and develop hygiene behaviours that work to protect us against infectious diseases threats we face ongoing, but also allow us to live full working and social lives. In respect of the disease threats we are likely to

encounter this winter, IFH has produced two short “when, where, how practical guides showing how to practise hygiene as part of our daily lives to protect against respiratory infections and norovirus. [5,6]



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