

Maybe you've seen the wall signs in the restrooms. Or the reminder above the doorknob. We've all seen the "avisos" in English and Spanish in restaurant bathrooms: "Lavase las manos!" Wash your hands! "Employees are required..." What's the big deal? Your mother always told you to wash; wasn't that just her compulsion about cleanliness? Well...yes. And no.

Hepatitis. The common "cold." MRSA (methicillin-resistant staph aureus). Influenza. All these and more can be spread by direct hand-to-hand or indirect hand-to-object-to-hand contact. Why, then, don't we pay more attention to keeping our hands clean? Simple answer: it seems too easy. Can simply washing our hands keep us healthier? Answer: yes! Study upon study has shown that *handwashing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection* from person to person.

Simply splashing water on your hands isn't enough. There's a technique to hand-washing and it has to be done correctly to be effective. First, you need warm to hot water. Second: soap! Lather up your hands (and under your nails) and scrub---particularly the contact surfaces of your fingers and palms---for 20-30 seconds. Seem short? Well, compared to the 1-2 second splash that many consider "washing" their hands, it can seem like a long time. Sing or recite "Happy Birthday" or the alphabet quickly to yourself twice; that's about the right amount of time to scrub. (Studies have shown that the rubbing itself destroys some of the viruses and bacteria on our hands!) Rinse, then grab a towel, use it to turn off the faucet, and with the part that didn't touch the faucet, dry your hands. Then use it or another towel to open the door. (If you touch the handle, you've re-contaminated your hands with anything another person has left behind). That's it!

What about the alcohol-based hand sanitizers? They're good when you can't get to a sink. But they're only a temporary (and, yes, effective) fix. As soon as you can, get to a place where you can wash with warm, soapy water using the method discussed above. So wash your hands correctly and see if your health improves. And don't forget to teach your kids! [See "[Henry the Hand](#)" website.] Even one less cold per year can make a world of difference!

Relevant link: [My coworkers are making me sick](#) CNN Dec 2007

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