Infection control is in your hands: NetWellness

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By Special to The Plain Dealer

Infection control is important because it is the best way that we can prevent the spread of many common contagious diseases. Here, we discuss effective methods of infection control, particularly with regard to schools and day care centers.

What are infections?

Infections are caused by germs within our bodies that shouldn't be there. Viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites are all different categories of germs which each cause different types of infections.

**Viruses:** These influenza virus particles or "virions" cause the contagious respiratory illness known as flu.

**Bacteria:** E. coli 0157:H7 can cause foodborne illness, bloody diarrhea, kidney failure and sometimes death.

**Fungi:** This fungus, *Penicillium marneffei*, usually affects those with AIDS or those who are undergoing chemotherapy.

**Parasites:** *Giardia lamblia* infection can occur from contaminated water, food or by the fecal-oral route.

How do we get infections?

Viruses, bacteria, fungi or parasites can be spread when a sick person coughs into the air or by touching that person's secretions (urine, runny nose, cough and diarrhea). Drinking or eating after an ill person or handling items that they have touched are common ways you can come into contact with these secretions. When the germ particles enter your body, they can cause you to have an infection.
Since most infections are spread by touch, washing your hands before touching another person is one of the best ways to help stop the spread of infections. However, it is important to wash your hands even when you are not feeling sick because most germs are actually transmitted a few days before you start feeling sick.

**What is the best way to wash your hands for proper infection control?**

The **Henry the Hand Campaign** seeks to educate the public on four important principles of good hand-washing that help to reduce the spread of infections:

1. Wash your hands when they are dirty and before eating.
2. Do not cough into your hands.
3. Do not sneeze into your hands.
4. Do not put your fingers into your eyes, nose or mouth.

Regular soap and water are best. Antibacterial soaps are not necessary if you have spent enough time (at least 20 seconds) cleaning your hands with regular soap and water.

**How long do you need to wash your hands for good infection control?**

The answer is 20 seconds. Singing a song like "Happy Birthday" twice while cleaning your hands with soap and water helps to assure that you have spent the correct amount of time required to actually kill the germs on your hands.

**When should you wash your hands to prevent infection?**

1. Before, during and after preparing food.
2. Before eating food.
3. Before and after caring for someone who is sick.
4. Before and after treating a cut or wound.
5. After using the toilet.
6. After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet.
7. After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
8. After touching an animal or animal waste.
9. After touching garbage.

--- **Source**: Handwashing: Clean Hands Save Lives

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If only people would abide by these very simple guidelines! Instead, and I still cannot figure it out, I see people cough right into their hands and continue on with whatever it was that they were doing! I am constantly wiping stuff down with antibacterial wipes and washing my hands. I worked in a pharmacy for years and handled that pretty well as far as germs go, but now I am in an office and the stuff I see people do amazes and disgusts me! I have turned into a germaphobe from my current job!

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The so-called "stomach flu" -- norovirus -- is a perfect example of an illness that could be virtually eliminated if everyone was careful with washing their hands. Norovirus is shed in a sick person's vomit and feces, and a person is infected by ingesting the virus particles. In other words, a sick person has to touch something and then you touch it and eat without washing your hands, or a sick person handles food and then you eat it. Then within 12-48 hours you get sick as a dog. Noroviruses aren't airborne (although the virus particles can land on things...). So all you have to do to basically eliminate the spread of norovirus is WASH YOUR HANDS with soap and water after using the restroom (it washes the virus down the drain). The fact that norovirus is so common in the winter shows how few people take basic precautions to wash their hands.

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