

## IS THE CURE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM?

According to the U. S. Centers for Disease Control, "Hand washing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection." That sounds simple enough. Soap is cheap, water is plentiful and hand washing doesn't really take very much time. Its something everyone can do easily. Truthfully, hand washing can be a very effective front-line defense against bacteria and other organisms that cause colds, flu, skin problems, and even deadly communicable diseases. But, do we really believe this message, or are we turning a deaf ear?

For instance, do we always wash hands after a trip to the rest room? Apparently not. A 1996 survey by the American Society for Microbiology found that only 68% of the population washes their hands after using the rest room. In the same survey, respondents stated they washed their hands before handling food or eating. Yet only 21% of males and only 58% of female respondents actually did. In an earlier survey, the New England Journal of Medicine stated that even health care professionals fail to follow hand washing protocols as much as 60% of the time.

Perhaps many of us try to compensate for our lethargic personal health habits with new products that are on the market. There is currently an overabundance of antibacterial hand soaps on the market. A recent survey of more than 1100 liquid and solid hand soaps found that nearly half of them contained anti-bacterial agents. If we listen to the advertising hype, we are led to believe that these anti-bacterial soaps are much more efficient than ordinary soaps in the process of stopping the spread of disease, yet this may not accurate.

Researchers attending a meeting of the American Academy of Dermatology last summer have suggested that antibacterial soaps may be aggravating the problem rather than solving it. Antibacterial hand soaps tend to be harsher and remove more natural oils from the skin than ordinary soaps. This result can be irritated skin with eczema and open sores that can actually attract bacteria. The same antibacterial agents in soaps that kill bacteria can be very irritating to a person's hands. Antibacterials are much more effective at removing the naturally protective fats and oils in the skin. Skin moisture is lost, and dryness and roughness increase, and the healthy skin growth process is disrupted.

Whether the very prevalent use of anti-bacterial hand soaps is contributing to the rise of drug resistant super bugs is still open to debate. Dr. Eli Perencevich of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston wishes that people would just skip antibacterial products altogether. "No one has ever been able to prove that using antibacterial hand soaps meant that anyone was better off than those using standard soap. However, there are lab studies that suggest use of such products kill off the sensitive bacteria, leaving behind the hardier bacteria such as E. Coli and staphylococcus aureus which could be detrimental to health. The fear is that this process will result in bacteria that live longer."

Industry officials are concerned that these fears may be misplaced. Dr. Jerry McEwen of the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association states, "The rising incidence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria is a serious worldwide concern. There is no real-life evidence that antibacterial products – as they are normally used in hospitals, in food preparation and in people's homes – contribute to bacterial resistance. While some studies have shown that antibacterial ingredients may promote resistant bacteria, these studies have been done under

controlled laboratory conditions that do not reflect what happens to bacteria that consumers encounter in the real world.”

It is likely the debate over antibacterial soaps versus regular soaps may continue for quite some time before any definitive conclusion is reached. It is certain, however, that frequent and thorough hand washing using regular soap and running water can be very effectual at reducing the numbers of bacteria and other pathogens on the hands along with decreasing the spread of disease.

The Barren River District Board of Health is convinced of the importance of proper hand washing and its very important role in the prevention of the spread of communicable diseases. At the January 28 meeting of the Board, they adopted a policy, which requires the posting of signs that encourage proper hand washing in public food service facilities and in rest rooms, including employee rest rooms. The health department will provide the signs free of charge. Additionally, the health department environmental staff will check for compliance in facilities that are subject to inspection and report instances of non-compliance.

Disclaimer: While we do support use of soaps without anti-bacterials, the Barren River District Health Department does not endorse any specific product for handwashing.

Disclaimer

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