

WASH HANDS FOR HEALTH—BUT FOR HOW LONG?

By Sharon Kirkey and Jack Branswell, Canwest News Service. January 31, 2009

We know the drill: Wash hands to keep from getting sick and spreading germs. But even government officials can't agree on how long to scrub, according to internal government documents.

Ten, 15, or 20 seconds? Long enough to sing Happy Birthday twice or Twinkle Twinkle Little Star once?

Correspondence between senior Ontario and federal bureaucrats obtained under an access to information request reveals disparities in hand washing advice, as discovered by an Ontario health official who surveyed government health websites looking for advice.

"The results are very interesting and I'm not sure if they mean that some Canadians have dirtier hands than others but the recommended amount of time to scrub with soap and water ranges from 10 sec (National Pandemic Plan plus others) to 15 sec (Alberta and Ontario) (I found it interesting that they agree) to 20 seconds (Man., B.C., N.B., Sask., and CDC Atlanta)," the Ontario official wrote in an e-mail in October 2007.

The Centres for Disease Control in Atlanta "also recommends singing Happy Birthday twice, while here in the North we recommend singing it once (too cold for the dirt to stick to us.)"

The inconsistencies prompted her to muse, "Maybe we should have a National consensus meeting on how to wash your hands."

According to one official in the e-mail thread, "this does not reflect well on the public health and infection prevention/control system."

The Public Health Agency of Canada says that immunization, combined with regular hand washing and "respiratory etiquette" (covering coughs with elbows, not hands, and staying home if you're sick) are the most effective methods to avoid contracting and spreading the flu.

Last November, a pan-Canadian Web portal designed to provide one-stop access to information about influenza and ways to limit its spread was launched. The site, www.fightflu.ca - which all provinces and territories participated in - recommends rubbing hands together with soap and water for at least 15 seconds, and rinsing for at least another 10 seconds.

"I would have thought a little longer would be better," says Dr. Dick Zoutman, chief of microbiology and infectious diseases at Kingston General Hospital.

"If your hands look visibly clean - that doesn't mean there aren't germs there but there's no gross soil - the minimum amount of time that you can actually pull it off, to add soap, add water and do it, is certainly no less than 30 seconds, and the general recommendation is about a minute."

Alcohol kills germs faster than soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs "result in rapid de-germing of your hands, if they are not visibly soiled," Zoutman says.

The federal government is in the final stages of preparing new hand hygiene guidelines for health care workers that will emphasize alcohol hand rubs over soap and water, and technique over a specific amount of time, says Philippe Brideau, of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

A recent study from the McGill University Health Centre found only one in four doctors wash their hands between patients on some wards. Nurses do better, but their rate of compliance is still 40 to 50 per cent, the Montreal Gazette reported.

Between 4000 and 8000 Canadians die of influenza and its complications each year. Adults can spread flu to others at any point between one day before symptom onset to up to seven days afterwards, according to the government.

"A lot of these viruses are transmitted from our hands," Zoutman says. We imagine bugs flying through the air but the vast majority don't travel when we cough and sneeze, he says. "They go maybe a meter, at best two meters." But they're on the surfaces of everything we touch.

To achieve sterility is just not possible, "unless you want to go live on the moon," Zoutman says. "Just clean your hands. It's really efficient."

So far, the influenza season appears to be milder than in recent years.

FACT BOX

Steps for good hand washing technique, from fightflu.ca:

- Remove all rings and wet your hands with warm running water.
- Put a small amount of liquid soap in the palm of one hand. Bar soaps are not as hygienic as liquid soaps because they stay moist and attract germs. If bar soap is the only option, it should be stored on a rack so that it doesn't sit in water.
- Rub your hands together for at least 15 seconds so you produce lather. Make sure you scrub between your fingers, under your fingernails and the backs of your hands.
- Rinse your hands well with clean running water for at least 10 seconds. Try not to handle the faucets once your hands are clean. Use a paper towel to turn off the water.
- Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel.