

Handy HINTS

Hand hygiene is extremely important when looking after your little one. **SHIDEH KIAFAR** explains how best to keep your baby free from infection.

A new baby is completely dependent on loved ones and they need lots of care and attention. You are responsible for their welfare and this means trying, as much as possible, to prevent your baby from acquiring infections. Hygiene and cleanliness are very important for a young baby. As babies can't wash themselves, it is vital that you, as the parent, have good hygiene practices in place. These practices are important in terms of protecting against viral flu and other illnesses, but also to protect against the all too common gastro bugs which can make a young baby very ill and at risk of dehydration. One of the most effective ways of preventing infection and safeguarding your baby is good hand hygiene and basic hand-washing.

Big bad bacteria

Remember all those times your mum told you to wash your hands? Well, she was onto something. Consider anything that you touch on a daily basis: light switches, door knobs, food, phones – literally any part of our environment can provide a home for potentially dangerous bacteria. Although bacteria are not always harmful to adults, newborns, and particularly special care babies, are fragile little beings and can be extremely susceptible to infection.

Our hands are not sterile and bacteria found on them are either resident or transient. Resident bacteria are deep seated, difficult to remove and are part of the body's natural defence mechanism. Transient bacteria, then, can be transferred with ease to and from hands and are a leading cause of cross-infection, but can easily be removed with good hand hygiene. Therefore, the purpose of

hand-washing is to mechanically remove soil and debris from the skin to reduce bacteria numbers.

Back to Basics

Hand-washing with plain soap and clean water remains a sensible strategy for good hand hygiene.

Remember to:

- Work up a good lather and make sure you wash your wrists, hands, fingers, thumbs, fingernails, and in between your fingers.
- You should rub your hands with soap for at least 15 seconds to kill the bacteria.
- Rinse the soap off hands with clean water.
- It is also important to dry your hands properly using a clean hand towel as bacteria builds up if hands are damp.
- Avoid leaving bars of soap moist by using a proper stand. Bar soaps contain fatty acid (oil) and if they remain moist they absorb dirt and micro-organisms use it as food and grow on it easily.

Cuts on cuticles, hands and arms must be covered with a waterproof dressing. In addition to thorough washing with soap and water, proper hand hygiene also includes attention to fingernails and jewellery.

The longer the fingernails and more intricate the jewellery, the greater the available surface area for germs to inhabit. Artificial nails are particularly inviting to bacteria. Additionally, sharp edges of jewellery or ragged fingernails have the potential to scratch the baby. Rings with stones act as moisture traps, therefore, it's advisable to remove jewellery, and to keep nails short and clean.

Remember to wash your hands...

- Before and after baby care.
- Before and after changing a nappy.
- Before making up a feed or bottle.
- Before and after carrying out cord care.
- Before removing items from a steriliser.
- Before and after breastfeeding.
- Before handling or eating food.
- Before giving first aid or medication.
- Immediately after handling high-risk food, e.g. meat.
- After using the toilet.
- After contact with blood or body fluids, e.g. faeces, vomit, nasal secretions or saliva.
- After touching a contaminated area, e.g. rubbish bin or cleaning cloth.
- After handling pets, pet cages, feeding utensils and other pet items (litter trays).
- Whenever hands look dirty.

Hand-washing is essential: our hands come in contact with more surfaces and elements than any part of the body. Carry pocket alcohol hand rub with you to use when soap and water is unavailable. Keeping your hands clean, as much as is reasonable, is one of the best hygiene tips available. If you have any questions about hand hygiene and preventing infections, talk to your doctor or public health nurse.

Shideh Kiafar is an Infection Control Midwife with the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin.

For more information visit the Infection Control Section of the National Maternity Hospital (www.nmh.ie) and download a Caring Hands are Clean leaflet.

