Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Hand Hygiene and Preventing Infection

This resource explains how to clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Why is hand hygiene important?

When germs get into your body, they can cause infection. Everyone is at risk for infection while in the hospital. Hand hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of germs and infections.

Washing your hands or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (such as Purell®) for just 20 seconds kills germs. Clean your hands and ask your visitors to clean their hands.

When to clean your hands with soap and water

Clean your hands:

- After using the toilet, urinal, or bedside commode.
- If your hands look dirty.
- Before you eat or prepare food.
- If you have an infection with the germ *Clostridium*

difficile (*C. diff*) or norovirus.

- After vomiting (throwing up) or coughing up phlegm (mucus).

How to clean your hands with soap and water

1. Wet your hands with warm water. Use liquid soap, if you can. Use enough soap to cover both hands.
2. Rub your hands together. Rub the soap over the top of your hands, between your fingers, and around and under your fingernails.
3. Keep rubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds.
4. Rinse your hands well under warm running water.
5. Dry your hands with a paper towel.
6. Use a dry paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the bathroom door, if needed.

How to wash your hands

One of the best and easiest ways to protect yourself from the spread of germs is to wash your hands. Watch this video on how to scrub your hands.

VIDEO | 00:58 Video Details

When to clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer

Clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer:

- If you don't have soap and water.
- When you leave your hospital room.
- When you go back into your hospital room.
- Before eating.

If you cannot get out of bed, you can use an individually packaged hand wipe.

How to clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer

1. Use enough sanitizer to cover both of your hands.
2. Rub your hands together. Rub the sanitizer over the top of your hands, between your fingers, and around and under your fingernails.
3. Keep rubbing your hands together until they're dry. It should take at least 20 seconds of rubbing before they feel dry.

Do not rinse your hands with water or dry them with a towel after using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

When to call your care team

Call your care team if you have any of these:

- A fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- A temperature of 96.8 °F (36 °C) or lower.
- New or worsening chills or sweating.
- New or worsening redness around a wound.
- New or increased drainage from a wound.
- New or worsening shortness of breath or trouble breathing.
- A heartbeat that is faster than usual.
- New or worsening cough.
- New or worsening pain.

Talk with a member of your care team if you have questions. You can also visit www.cdc.gov/clean-hands, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) "About Handwashing" webpage.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Hand Hygiene and Preventing Infection - Last updated on September 28, 2026
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center