
Loss Control: Activities to Prevent Accidents or Reduce the Cost of Accidents in the Workplace

HANDWASHING PREVENTS ILLNESS

What's the connection between illness prevention and hand washing? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), frequent and careful hand washing is one of the best ways for your workers to prevent infection—and the spread of infections in the workplace. And the fewer colds and flu, gastrointestinal infections, and communicable illness among your workforce, the fewer lost workdays and the more people on the job where you need them. So find some time this week to talk to employees about keeping their hands clean and their bodies healthy.

It's a dirty world out there. Would you believe that the average workstation has 400 times more germs than a toilet seat? It's true, says office product manufacturer Grand & Toy. That company says that workstation items like keyboards, computer mice, telephones, tools, and other items commonly used by workers can all harbor big colonies of germs that can make your workers sick. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Any surface can become contaminated by germs—door handles, elevator buttons, break room microwaves and coffee makers, and lots more. From any of these items, germs can get all over a worker's hands. And when the worker rubs her nose or eats a snack with those germey hands, the employee often ends up laid up at home for a couple of days. So keeping hands clean is a big, important workplace health issue—one you can't afford to ignore.

Why It Matters.

- Most workplaces experience a rise in lost workdays due to colds, flu, and other communicable illnesses during the winter months. The National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus reports that between 5 percent and 20 percent of Americans get the flu each year.
- Many more experience one or more colds during the winter season, often resulting in lost workdays. Washing hands frequently throughout the day can significantly reduce exposure to cold and flu germs—and reduce the risk of illness.

Proper technique is a must. Washing hands frequently during the day with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer removes germs. It's not a guarantee that an employee won't get sick, but it can certainly help. When washing hands with soap and water, CDC says employees should:

- Wet hands with clean running water (warm water if available) and apply soap.
- Rub hands together to make lather and scrub all surfaces. Pay particular attention to fingers, fingertips, and under fingernails where germs love to breed. Palms are heavy germ zones, too.
- Continue rubbing hands for 15-20 seconds (about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice).
- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If drying hands with a paper towel, use it to turn off the faucet.

If soap and clean water are not available, advise workers to use an alcohol-based hand rub to clean their hands. Alcohol-based hand rubs significantly reduce the number of germs on skin and are fast acting. When using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer: Apply product to the palm of one hand; Rub hands together; Rub the product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry.

Make sure your restrooms have plenty of soap and clean paper towels or are equipped with hot-air hand dryers. Also consider providing alcohol-based sanitizers in work areas throughout your facility so that employees can clean hands quickly without having to leave the work area.