

What is Hand Hygiene?

Hand hygiene is the name given to the process of cleaning your hands whether you are at home, in your office, on the road or in the grocery store. There are so many soaps, lotions and hand rubs and some interesting potions on the market; so which one should you use and when?

We all carry microorganisms on our skin. Some come and go (are *transient*) whereas others stay put forming a group of organisms that stick with us, known as *resident flora*, and are sometimes unique to the owner!

Transient organisms tend to colonize the upper layers of the skin and are acquired during direct contact with clients/patients, health care providers, contaminated equipment or items in your environment. Ever wonder what was on that last doorknob you touched? The problem with transient organisms is that they can be easily passed on to others or to objects in the environment and then to others. Some transient organisms can cause disease; the flu virus is one example.

Each individual's *Resident flora* are found in deeper layers of skin and are more resistant to removal. These organisms do not generally cause disease and can in fact be beneficial to the good health of your skin.

When we perform hand hygiene, we sometimes attempt to remove visible soil and always try to remove or kill transient microorganisms from the hands while leaving resident organisms undisturbed so that hand health can be maintained.

So how do we do this? Well, there are two general methods and which one you use depends on what you wish to remove.

Hand sanitizing or decontamination

with a 70 to 90% alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) is the preferred method when hands do not look or feel dirty

Using ABHR in any setting takes less time than traditional hand washing, is more convenient and is less harsh and drying to the skin and more effective than washing with soap and water when hands are not visibly soiled.

Hand washing

with plain soap and running water should be performed when hands look or feel dirty, after you use the bathroom and before eating.

This is because the mechanical action of washing, rinsing and drying removes organic material from the hands which is likely to inhibit the action of alcohol. Once the organic material is gone, the transient microorganisms are then easily removed. When hands are visibly soiled and running water is not available, use a moistened towelette to remove the visible soil, followed by ABHR.

Finally, there is no advantage of using antimicrobial over plain soap except for medical or surgical procedures where a long-lasting residual antibacterial effect is required.

For more information available both in English and in French, please click here (scroll to bottom of the webpage for downloadable PDFs):

<http://www.oahpp.ca/resources/pidac-knowledge/best-practice-manuals/hand-hygiene.html>