

Script – Print – The Dirt on Not Washing Your Hands

COVID-19 is Just One Reason to Practice Good Hand Hygiene

As children, we were constantly reminded to wash our hands. It not only helped get rid of dirt and grime, it also helped eliminate germs. In the past nearly two years, that lesson has been played out across the globe as a reminder that good hand hygiene can help contain the spread of COVID-19.

But fighting off a pandemic isn't the only reason to practice proper handwashing. There are many other health-related issues that could be avoided, or perhaps be less serious if we all just spent extra time washing our hands.

"Handwashing is extremely important and we always recommend washing your hands," said Dr. Divyesh Morker, OSF HealthCare family practice physician. "It's come into light because of the whole COVID situation. We shouldn't forget things that it can prevent. Things like eye infections, skin infections, diarrhea, upper respiratory infections of course we know about. But all of those things are very, very important as far as prevention is concerned."

The numbers certainly back that up. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, proper handwashing can reduce the number of people who get sick with diarrhea by 23-40 percent; reduces respiratory illness, like colds, in the general population by 16-21 percent; and reduces absenteeism due to gastrointestinal illness in school-aged children by 29-57 percent. There are 70 million work days missed each year due to cold and flu-related illnesses. And yet, a study by the University of Birmingham discovered that more than 50 percent of people in the world don't wash their hands after using the bathroom, including 23 percent of Americans.

"I think everyday life and everyday problems supersede or overcome general stuff that we should do," said Dr. Morker. "People come in for diabetes, people come in for high blood pressure and infection prevention falls by the wayside sometimes. It lends more focus on other subjects. It's important for us as physicians and providers to have patients really focus on washing their hands and prevention more than anything else."

And then there's sepsis, a potentially life-threatening condition caused by infection.

"Sepsis is really on the spectrum of infections the worst type of infection that you can get," said Dr. Morker. "Things like skin infections. We carry staph infections which is a bacteria that is on our skin all the time. Let's say if someone gets a wound and you have hands that you haven't washed and if you touch that wound it has the potential of getting infected. If you let that infection fester, it will eventually turn into sepsis. And sepsis is, obviously, a very, very significant and severe infection of the body, which a simple thing like washing your hands can prevent."

When it comes to handwashing, Dr. Morker's advice is simple. He tells patients to wash anytime they feel like there are germs or bacteria on their hands. Wash before, during and after preparing meals, eating meals and after visiting the restroom. Wash your hands for 20 seconds, including

the back of your hands, your finger tips and between your fingers. Using hand sanitizer is fine, but it should never be used as a substitute for handwashing.

“And that’s something that everyone should engrain into their minds,” adds Dr. Morker. “This pandemic, obviously, has heightened the need and importance of handwashing. But even when the pandemic is over, even when this COVID-19 pandemic is behind us, I encourage everyone to keep that as their primary source of remembering to wash your hands every single day, multiple times per day as a prevention method to prevent common illnesses and bacteria.”