

Dirty nails and mouths don't mix

Emily Isom has a new year's resolution for kids and their parents: pledge to keep your hands clean and away from your face to prevent the spread of illness.

Isom, a certified medical assistant in pediatrics at OSF HealthCare, often sees young people biting dirty fingernails and not washing their hands properly. Here's a primer:

Nail hygiene

Isom says people of all ages should trim their nails regularly. Once a week for fingernails and once or twice a month for toenails is a good rule of thumb. In between trimmings, watch for dirt and other filthy matter caught under the tip of the nail. Some nail clippers come with a scraper tool to remove that debris. But don't use your mouth to clean your nails.

"Our nails carry so many germs and bacteria. That's how people keep getting sick and spreading illness," Isom warns, referring to putting fingernails in your mouth or on your face. You can also chip teeth and get facial warts and pimples from putting nails on your face, she says.

Some people have long nails, either real or artificial. In these cases, use a nail brush to regularly wipe the nails clean. If you're at work or school and don't have a brush, wash the nails thoroughly. Lather warm water and soap on the palms of your hands. Take your fingertips and scratch against the palm of the other hand to get the soap in the fingernail. Do that for 20 seconds. Then, pull down the fingertips to the palm of the same hand and massage the soap in further. Put your hands upside down under hot running water to rinse.

Hand washing

Isom says most people concentrate on their palms when hand washing.

"You need to get in between the fingers, underneath the nails, on the back of the hands, rub your knuckles together and scrub your wrists," Isom says.

After wetting your hands, scrub all those areas in soap for 20 seconds. Find a song that has a 20-second chorus and hum it while you scrub. Then, rinse under warm water, and dry your hands with a clean, dry towel. Isom also suggests wrapping a paper towel around your hand when touching dirty surfaces on your way out of the bathroom. Use the towel to shut off the faucet and open the door, then throw the towel away after you exit.

If a hand dryer is what's available, run your hands under the warm air until they are completely dry. Resist the urge to dry halfway and walk out. Isom says that may do more harm than good and attract bacteria faster.

"Bacteria want to live on wet surfaces. They're attracted to moistness," she points out.

If a soap and sink aren't available, Isom says to use sanitizer or wipes that are at least 60% alcohol based. The same process applies – lather or wipe all parts of your hand and wrist thoroughly.

If you have a cut or wound on your hand, like a paper cut, wash with care.

"Get a washcloth wet with warm water. Put soap on it. Then, clean around the cut or wound," Isom says. "Don't put [soap] directly into the cut. That could really irritate it."

Convincing kids

Isom is a pediatrics provider and a mother. So, she knows getting kids to wash their hands and mind their nails is easier said than done. Her advice: make it fun.

"When handwashing, sing the ABCs for 20 seconds. Or have them sing to you." Isom suggests. "Make a chart. Every time they wash their hands, have them put a sticker on the chart. They are going to fall in love with it and want to wash their hands over and over again."

And remember Simon Says? Isom says it works with her daughter.

"Simon says don't touch your face," Isom says with a smirk.

Learn more

Read more about how to keep your hands clean and prevent the spread of illnesses on the [OSF HealthCare](#) and the [United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) websites.