

Study: Most People Aren't Properly Washing Hands

The flu continues to hit hard. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported almost 175,000 Americans sickened by the virus so far this year. Nationwide, more than 100 children have died from the illness this flu season alone.

One of the best ways to prevent seasonal flu is to get vaccinated each year. However additional healthy habits can help stop the spread of germs and prevent respiratory illnesses like the flu, including practicing proper hand hygiene.

Tina Barton, Infection Preventionist at OSF HealthCare Saint James-John W Albrecht Medical Center in Pontiac, says simple handwashing is one of our most important lines of defense.

"It's very important. It's our number one defense in spreading infection and germs," she explained.

However, a recent study indicates that most of us aren't taking the time to thoroughly wash our hands – opening the door for disease. The study, published in the [Journal of Environmental Health](#), found that just 5% of people properly washed their hands for 15 seconds or longer after using the restroom; men averaged just six seconds, and women averaged seven seconds.

Barton says the findings are not surprising to her, and that she advises people to assume most things are harboring unwanted germs.

"You have to assume that no one else is washing their hands. You have to," Barton urged. She continued, "Every surface that you touch, someone else has touched. Everything that you pick up or you touch, someone else has picked up and touched. So you have to be very aware of that."

The [CDC recommends](#) a five step handwashing process: wetting hands with clean running water; lathering soap on hands, including under nails, between fingers and the backs of hands; scrubbing at least 20 seconds, or roughly the time it takes to hum the "Happy Birthday" song twice; rinsing hands; and then drying them with an air dryer or clean towel.

"One of the misconceptions is the soap part of it. People think, I need that antimicrobial soap or the antibacterial soap they sell, and it's really about the friction. It's about rubbing those hands together and definitely with visibly soiled hands. When you can see it on your hands, you need to get in there and scrub it, and it's the friction that removes it from your hands," explained Barton.

If no soap and water is available, Barton says people can instead use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.

Barton also advises people avoid close contact with people who are sick; to stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick; to cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing; and avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

Talk to your primary care physician about getting your flu vaccine and other steps you can take to avoid the flu. Don't have a primary care physician? Find one [here](#).