

Working Safely During Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Hand washing and sanitising

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the government recommend that everyone, to protect, prevent and slow the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19), should wash or sanitise their hands regularly. This advice has been written to assist employers, businesses and workers providing practical guidance on procedures, facilities and product selection.

The importance of hand washing and sanitising regularly

Coronavirus (COVID-19) spreads primarily from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth, which are expelled when an infected person with coronavirus (COVID-19) coughs, sneezes or speaks. The droplets land on objects and surfaces around the person such as doorknobs, light switches, handrails, tables, chairs. When other people touch these objects or surfaces, then touch their eyes, nose or mouth, the virus can enter and infect the body.

The facts

- Regular handwashing is one of the best ways to remove germs (bacteria, viruses, and other microscopic particles), avoid getting sick and preventing the spread of germs to others¹
- Up to 80% of all infections are transmitted by hands throughout the day²
- Thumbs and fingertips are two of the most frequently missed areas when hand washing³
- Germs can be transferred more easily to and from wet hands so hands should be dried thoroughly after washing⁴
- Use running water when washing hands as hands could become re-contaminated if rinsed in a basin of standing water⁵



Hand washing versus sanitising

COVID-19 is an enveloped virus. This means that the RNA (nucleic acid – the viral genetic material) is coated in a lipid (fatty) layer. Soap is able to dissolve this lipid layer, causing the virus to fall apart and stop it from binding to our cells. Alcohol-based hand sanitisers work in a similar way, inactivating the virus by breaking down the lipid layer.⁶

Consideration needs to be taken as to the potential hazards the skin may come into contact with as well as the specific nature of work. Washing hands thoroughly and regularly with soap and clean running water is the best way to clean hands when physically soiled or greasy.

Hand sanitisers may not remove or inactivate many types of harmful chemicals, like pesticides and heavy metals, from hands. If hands have touched harmful chemicals, wash carefully with soap and water (or as directed by a poison control centre).

Hand sanitisers work well in clinical settings and food handling environments where there's a need for a high level of vital hand hygiene. Hand sanitisers also provide a simple solution when there's no access to soap and water, after coughing, sneezing, contact with body fluids or touching potentially contaminated surfaces.

Advice on correct hand washing and sanitising procedures



When to wash hands

- As soon as arriving at work and at home
- After using the toilet
- After coughing, blowing the nose or sneezing
- When hands are visibly soiled
- Before and after eating, handling food, drinking or smoking
- Before and after handling raw meat, poultry, fish or vegetables
- After handling frequently used equipment
- After cleaning, handling rubbish or touching contaminated surfaces such as bins, cleaning cloths
- Before and after wearing gloves
- After handling money
- Visiting or caring for sick people
- Before and after treating a cut or wound
- After contact with blood or body fluids such as vomit or saliva
- After wiping another person's nose or handling soiled tissues
- Before preparing or taking medications
- Before and after removing contact lenses
- After touching animals, their food and after cleaning cages

How long to wash hands for

Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds all together (rinsing and lathering) using soap and clean running water or, where there's no access to clean water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

To help with the length of time taken to wash hands thoroughly, an option is to sing "Happy Birthday" twice.

Steps to washing and sanitising hands correctly

1. Wet the hands with clean water
2. Apply enough **soap** to cover both hands
3. Rub hands together, palm to palm
4. Use one hand to rub the back of the other hand, clean in between fingers. Do the same with the other hand
5. Rub both hands together and clean in between fingers
6. Rub the back of the fingers against the palms
7. Rub the thumb using the other hand and do the same on the other thumb
8. Rub the tips of the fingers on the palm of the hand and do the same on the other hand.
9. Rinse hands well with clean water
10. Dry hands thoroughly with a disposable towel
11. Use the disposable towel to turn off the tap

If you don't have access to clean running water and soap, follow steps one to eight, with an **alcohol-based hand sanitiser** containing at least 60% alcohol. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose immediately afterwards as it can cause irritation.



Use of Hand Sanitisers

Selecting a suitable hand sanitiser

Specify and use an **alcohol-based hand sanitiser** that contains at least 60% alcohol. The higher alcohol percentage will usually translate into higher efficacy. Products with a 5-log minimum kill rate (99.999%) are 100 times more effective than 3-log (99.9%) sanitisers. It is best to use a hand sanitiser that contains moisturisers to prevent skin dryness and perfume-free and dye-free to reduce potential allergic reactions and skin irritations.

In the food industry and in food preparation areas, it is important that hand sanitiser formulations are non-tainting and have been tested for suitability. This ensures that the hand sanitiser will not impact on the smell and taste of food stuffs or present any health risk to consumers.

Alcohol-free hand sanitisers are suitable for organisations with vulnerable patients, such as mental health facilities, prisons, rehabilitation and elderly care facilities. The kill rate is less effective than alcohol-based hand sanitisers at 3-log (99.9%) and won't work equally well for many types of germs, such as COVID-19, merely reducing the growth and not killing germs outright.

Watch out for expiry dates on products. Once the expiration date has been reached, the hand sanitiser may become less effective or even ineffective – it may still work but this cannot be guaranteed and replacing it would be recommended.



Sources and useful references.

- 1 <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/health-strategies/flu-pneumonia/interventions/environmental-support.html>
- 2 <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/index.html>
- 3 Deb Group/Taylor 1978
- 4 <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/show-me-the-science-handwashing.html>
- 5 <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/show-me-the-science-handwashing.html>
- 6 <https://www.which.co.uk/news/2020/04/hand-hygiene-soap-and-sanitiser-gel-what-you-need-to-know/>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/public-information-campaign-focuses-on-handwashing>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/best-way-to-wash-your-hands/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regulatory-status-of-equipment-being-used-to-help-prevent-coronavirus-covid-19>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/show-me-the-science-hand-sanitizer.html>
- <https://www.debgroupp.com/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/gd2344-hand-sanitiser-solutions-guide.pdf>
- <https://info.debgroupp.com/blog/the-importance-of-hand-sanitizer-placement-in-the-workplace>

Key locations for hand sanitisers

- ❑ **Entrances, exits and stairwells** – sanitisers should be easily accessible and always within sight as people come in and out of buildings, stairwells and lifts. Door handles, light switches and other high-touch areas can become contaminated and the virus transmitted easily. Sanitisers provide a back-up option to general hand washing routines, and encourage and remind people to sanitise hands, creating a positive environment.
- ❑ **Cafeterias, food courts, break rooms, kitchens** – anywhere food is consumed as several viruses and diseases can be digested.
- ❑ **Near to frequently used objects** – such as desks and workstations, phones, iPads, keyboard and mouse sets, bannisters, door handles. These can be transfer points for viruses as people touch these often. Locating hand sanitisers nearby keeps hand hygiene within reach.
- ❑ **Meeting rooms** – providing employees, customers and visitors easy-to-access to help safeguard their hands against viruses beforehand and afterwards.
- ❑ **Transaction counters** – after handling cash and items, it's crucial to keep hands clean. Sanitisers remind people to engage in hand hygiene when it's needed the most.
- ❑ **High traffic areas** - help to ensure employees, customers and visitors stay as healthy as possible and creates a positive image.

Creating a safer working environment

By encouraging regular handwashing in the workplace can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by keeping everyone in the workplace healthy and in turn reducing absenteeism and increasing productivity.

- **Be Prepared** – provide clean and well stocked **soap** and **paper towels** as maintenance of washrooms has a significant impact on hand hygiene. Install **sealed soap dispensers** to provide the most hygienic system - reduces cross-infection risk from several people extracting the product and opening communal containers.
- **Provide Hand Sanitisers** - for those people who don't have access to washroom facilities, in key locations listed in the previous section and in high level environments where there's a need of vital hand hygiene.
- **Use Signage** – to help drive compliance. Locate **posters** near to dispensers to offer quick, simple and effective reminders to wash hands and facts about hand hygiene.
- **Train staff** – drive behavioural change by promoting, educating and reminding employees of best practice hand hygiene and techniques are vital for everyone's health and wellbeing. Include clear communication of hand washing policies, employee responsibilities and management responsibilities.