



Southwest District Health

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Media Advisory

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Note to Editor: The month of September is National Food Safety month, and Southwest District Health (SWDH) would like to use the opportunity to promote food safety practices during this time. For the next three weeks, SWDH will provide the community with tips on proper food safety techniques leading up to our district Food Merit Awards on September 26, 2006.

The IMPORTANCE OF HANDWASHING

By C. J. Soltis

Southwest District Health
Consumer Protection Programs

Did you know that 20% of consumers do not wash their hands or kitchen surfaces before they prepare their food?

Many people do not think about food safety until a food-related illness affects them or a family member. While the food supply in the United States is one of the safest in the world, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 76 million people get sick, more than 300,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 Americans die each year from food borne illness. Preventing food borne illness and death remains a major public health challenge.

The simple action of greeting a friend with a handshake, petting the family pet, handling money, or answering the phone all invite germs. In fact, your hands are a major contribution in the spread of germs. It has been estimated that proper handwashing can eliminate close to half of all cases of foodborne illnesses, including Salmonella, Hepatitis A, Shigellosis, Staphylococcus, Listeria, and e.Coli. Handwashing can be the most effective and simplest method to rid your hands of dirt and germs from entering into your body.

There's more to good handwashing than you think, so take your time. By rubbing your hands vigorously with soapy water you will pull both dirt and oil from your skin. The lather from the soap will assist in trapping the dirt so it can be rinsed away.

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SWDH recommends following proper hand washing etiquette.

- Wet your hands with warm water and apply liquid, bar or powdered soap
- Rub your hands together vigorously to make a lather and scrub the surface
- Continue for 20 seconds – it takes this long to dislodge and remove stubborn dirt from the crevasses on your skin. (Sing the alphabet or Happy Birthday all the way through – twice to ensure the proper time limit).
- Rinse with warm water
- Dry with a paper towel (Consider using paper towels to dry hands and throw those germs away.)

While practicing your handwashing technique, observe the surrounding area of the kitchen. Are your counter tops clean and uncluttered? Are the cutting boards smooth, durable and nonabsorbent? Check for wear and tear. If cutting boards have become worn with hard to clean crevasses, food and dirt can become trapped leaving germs to grow and contaminate food items that are cut next. Nonporous acrylic, plastic, glass, and solid wood cutting boards are longer lasting and may be washed in the dishwasher

Remember to clean your cutting boards and countertops after the surface to prepare raw meat, poultry, and seafood and before using the surface again for ready-to-eat foods such as raw fruits, vegetables and deli meats. Do not use the same cutting board and/or utensils that held the raw product without thoroughly cleaning. Any bacteria in the meat or the juice from the meat can contaminate the next food item. Whenever possible, use a separate cutting board for meat products, exclusively.

After washing with warm soapy water, an added bonus for any cleaning regimen is to sanitize any or all food contact surfaces. The easiest method is to use a mild bleach concentration (1 tablespoon unscented bleach to one gallon of water). Submerge the surfaces with the bleach solution and dry with a clean paper towel (throw those germs away), or use a spray bottle that can be stored next to the sink, and mist down all surfaces and let them air dry.

Because germs are found on all surfaces, cleanliness is a major factor in preventing foodborne illness. By keeping both your work surfaces and hands clean, the public can be assured that they are doing their part to reduce the risk of making themselves ill.