

Healthy habits can save lives

Current hand washing practices need to change

WHY IS IT SUCH A CHALLENGE TO APPLY ACCEPTABLE HAND WASHING PRACTICES IN THE WORKPLACE?

Are workplaces not supplying enough soap or warm water? Or could it be that in today's fast paced world, the 20 seconds required to work up a good lather seems like an eternity? Throughout the day, our fingers make contact with hundreds of items.

If you take the time, as I have, to consciously become aware of your hands and the hands of many food handlers you come into contact with, what you will discover could fill a book.

Surprisingly, some people don't wash their hands at all. I'm often given the excuses 'I'm too busy,' or 'It's not a convenient time,' 'I'm out of soap and paper towels,' or 'The boss doesn't wash his hands so why should I?'

We are all creatures of habit. When we were children, we were taught how to do things properly or we simply made observations from others. We had little regard as to whether what we did was right or wrong. If others were doing it, we considered it must be right.

In the workplace, we are told that there is a proper way to wash our hands and that our current hand washing practices need to change.

When we look around and see how others are washing their hands, we realize that we are not alone. Everyone seems to have his or her own method of hand washing. So what is the right way?

Before we look at the how to, we need to understand why we must wash our hands. Our body is covered with bacteria that for the most part are harmless. However, some of the bacteria and viruses we carry can cause disease not only to ourselves, but in others with whom we come into contact. Also, as we go about our day we contact germs that hitchhike on us. We can easily transfer these harmful contaminants to the food we prepare, serve and consume. Canadian statistics show each year there are approximately ten thousand reported food-borne illnesses (disease carried by food to people), resulting in hospitalizations and dozens of deaths. All result from eating contaminated food. We are all capable of preventing the transfer of these harmful germs, and proper hand washing by food handlers can dramatically change these statistics.

So what is the right way to wash our hands? As an observer, I have seen as many as seven different methods or practices in a single workplace. I have on file over a dozen different recommended practices from governments, hand-soap manufacturers and publishers of various

By Steve Burns

food safety certification programs. So it's no surprise that there is so much inconsistency and possibly confusion in the workplace.

The food code tells us we should wash our hands before starting a task, after completing a task and whenever there is an interruption in doing a task. Then of course we must wash our hands after using the washroom, coughing, sneezing, blowing our nose, smoking, touching our ear, eyes and the list goes on. We can certainly relate to this. In terms of frequency of washing, where do we draw the line? And then there is the question of how to do it properly. Based on what I have learned, here's my recommendation:

THE 411-HOW TO WASH YOUR HANDS

1. Prepare paper towels for drying your hands, turning off the tap water and for opening the washroom door if necessary.
 2. Turn on the tap water (as warm as you can tolerate) and add soap.
 3. Lather your hands and exposed arms for at least 20 seconds. How long is 20 seconds? Use a timer, count from 1001 to 1020 or sing the ABC song (preferably to yourself).
- Note: If you are going to use a nailbrush (a great way to ensure food handlers do not wear fake nails or nailpolish), now is the time to do so. After use, thoroughly rinse the brush and leave it in a sanitizing solution.
4. Rinse soap and put your arms and hands into the sink.
 5. Use paper towel to (a) dry your hands (b) shut off the tap water (c) open the washroom door. Don't forget to dispose of the paper towel afterwards.

How often should you wash your hands? "As often as the become contaminated!"

The Industry Choice Report survey of over 5,500 current and former foodservice employees nationwide. According to this survey, employees indicate that feeling like they do their jobs well is such an important issue that they would quit over it. "Feeling like everybody does their part," "Feeling like the company is well managed," and "Feeling like I do my job well" are also among the top issues that drive employee satisfaction and are directly influenced by training.

Therefore, educate and train employees about why hand washing is so important, when they should wash their hands and how to properly wash their hands. Employers, employees and consumers will all be safer, healthier and appreciative. It's also a great habit to take home.