

Too many fail to follow hand-washing guidelines

May 30 2009, By William Hageman

Everyone knows how to wash their hands. Warm water, lots of soap, a vigorous and thorough scrubbing, a good drying. Moms pound it into us from the time we're toddlers.

Why, then, don't people follow the rules?

"In many studies, people are able to score very well on their hand-washing knowledge," according to Dr. Anna Bowen, a medical epidemiologist for the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in the National Center for Zoonotic, Vectorborne and Enteric Diseases in Atlanta. "But (when) these same people are observed, they don't perform the proper hand-washing behaviors completely or consistently."

So what are we to do? Post large "Remember what Mom said" signs over bathroom sinks? Use stimulus money to hire bathroom police for public restrooms? A good start would be to remind folks of the CDC's hand-washing guidelines (available at cdc.gov/cleanhands):

- Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap. Use warm water if it is available.
- Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds. Need a timer? Imagine singing "Happy Birthday" twice to a friend.

- Rinse hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a paper towel or air dryer. If possible, use your paper towel to turn off the faucet.

Bowen notes that even all the publicity about washing your hands to avoid swine flu isn't enough to change behaviors.

"Research has repeatedly shown that health claims do not necessarily motivate people to wash hands, and that in many cultures, a desire to look clean, to be a good parent or disgust at the thought of dirt/germs, are more important motivators."

We decided to try a test of our own. Lurking in a corner of a men's room at a train station, an observer noted how 50 visitors washed their hands. It wasn't pretty.

Only five followed hand-washing guidelines offered by the CDC; 33 washed their hands for less than 20 seconds. Charmingly, two of those just got their hands wet so they could run them through their hair. Maybe worse, 12 avoided [hand-washing](#) altogether.

Then there was the guy who spit in the sink. Someone should tell his mother.

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