

To get college students to wash hands requires proper tools, attention-getting tactics

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The path to poor hand sanitation is paved with good intentions, according to researchers from Kansas State and North Carolina State Universities.

As college campuses prepare for an expected increase in H1N1 flu this fall, the researchers said students' actions will speak louder than words.

"Many students say they routinely wash their hands," said Douglas Powell, an associate professor of food safety at Kansas State University. "But even in an outbreak situation, many students simply don't."

In February 2006, Powell and two colleagues -- Ben Chapman, an assistant professor at North Carolina State University, and research assistant Brae Surgeoner -- observed hand sanitation behavior during an outbreak. What was thought to have been norovirus sickened nearly 340 students at the University of Guelph in Canada.

Hand sanitation stations and informational posters were stationed at the entrance to a residence hall cafeteria, where the potential for cross-contamination was high. The researchers observed that even during a high-profile outbreak, students followed recommended hand hygiene procedures just 17 percent of the time. In a self-reported survey after the outbreak had subsided, 83 of 100 students surveyed said they always followed proper hand hygiene but estimated that less than half of their

peers did the same.

The results appear in the September issue of the *Journal of Environmental Health*.

Powell said that in addition to providing the basic tools for hand washing - vigorous running water, soap and paper towels -- college students, especially those living in residence halls, need a variety of messages and media continually encouraging them to practice good hand hygiene.

"Telling people to wash their hands or posting signs that say, 'Wash your hands' isn't enough," Chapman said. "Public health officials need to be creative with their communication methods and messages."

Most students surveyed perceived at least one barrier to following recommended hand hygiene procedures. More than 90 percent cited the lack of soap, paper towels or hand sanitizer.

Additional perceived barriers were the notion that hand washing causes irritation and dryness, along with just being lazy and forgetful about hand washing. Fewer than 7 percent said a lack of knowledge of the recommended [hand hygiene](#) procedures was a barrier.

"Providing more facts is not going to get [students](#) to wash their hands," Powell said. "Compelling messages using a variety of media - text messages, Facebook and traditional posters with surprising images -- may increase [hand washing](#) rates and ultimately lead to fewer sick people."

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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