

Alcohol Hand Rubs and Hand Hygiene

Questions & Answers

Alcohol hand rubs, also known as alcohol hand sanitizers (liquid, gels, foams or towelettes) are one of the newer weapons in the fight against harmful microorganisms ('germs') that can make us sick. Alcohol kills bacteria and most viruses. Soap and water have not been replaced, but now have a partner in the war against germs.

What is 'hand hygiene'?

Hand hygiene is a term that means a process for the removal of both dirt *and* germs from the hands. This can be accomplished by using soap and running water and the six-step method (wet hands, apply soap, lather and rub for at least 20 seconds, rinse, dry and turn off the tap with the towel) **or** by using an alcohol hand rub.

Aren't hand rubs specifically for use in health care settings?

Alcohol hand rubs have been proven to increase hand hygiene in health care settings. Most health care settings now have alcohol hand rubs readily available for use by visitors and patients, as well as staff. Since bacteria and viruses can be picked up from surfaces such as handrails, doorknobs, and elevator buttons, and can even be acquired from shaking hands, it is a good idea to have them widely available in many public settings, including workplaces.

Can a hand rub replace hand washing?

Research has shown that the effectiveness of alcohol hand rub is significantly lowered if the hands are visibly soiled. The presence of dirt, grease, or food on your hands is an important consideration in the decision of whether or not to use an alcohol hand rub. If you can see dirt on your hands, it is important to wash them with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, then use of an alcohol hand rub is better than nothing at all. However, in the absence of any visible dirt or grease, hand rubs are as effective as washing with soap and water.

What is the difference between hand sanitizer and soap?

Hand rubs are sometimes referred to as waterless hand cleaners. They work by killing germs that are present on your hands. Soap does not kill germs; however it has a cleaning effect that, when combined with running water and rubbing, allows for the physical removal of germs.

Are hand rubs more effective than washing your hands with running water and soap?

No, traditional hand washing (running water and soap) is just as effective if done properly. Hand rubs enhance our ability to prevent infection because they can be put in high-risk areas, such as where people socialize, or at the entrance to buildings where hand washing may not be readily available.

Why promote hand rubs?

Hand rubs are effective in helping to prevent the spread of infections. We know that in studies where people regularly perform hand hygiene, the incidence of infections is lowered.

Why use *alcohol* hand rubs? Aren't there other formulations available that do not use alcohol?

Alcohol hand rubs and towelettes (minimum 60% alcohol) are the most effective hand sanitizer products on the market. Alcohol hand rubs have the broadest range of effectiveness across the different types of viruses and bacteria. Many non-alcohol hand rubs on the market contain a quaternary ammonia compound that is NOT effective against several common germs including rhinovirus (a cause of the common cold) and norovirus (a common cause of diarrhea and vomiting).

How do you decide where to locate hand rub dispensers?

Wall-mounted hand dispensers should be located at a height of between 36 to 48 inches above the floor at the following locations:

- entrances to buildings
- reception areas
- staff cafeterias and lunch rooms
- areas where staff or the public greet and meet

Are alcohol hand rubs safe?

Yes, alcohol hand rubs are safe. As with all such products, proper use is important since alcohol is flammable. Be sure to always allow the hand rub to dry before you touch anything electrical and before you come into contact with an open flame (such as when lighting a cigarette). This will take no longer than about 5 to 15 seconds. Store personal bottles of alcohol hand rub in a manner that ensures they do not come into contact with an open flame. Following this advice will minimize the small potential safety hazard that exists.

Are they safe for children?

While safe to use as directed, ingestion of this product by children poses a poisoning risk. Alcohol hand rubs should be kept well out of reach of young children, and used only with adult supervision.

I've heard that alcohol hand rubs dry out skin.

People will have different tolerances for these products. The newer products are gentler and contain more moisturizers than the original products. Some people may prefer to use hand lotion more frequently when using these products. Others may prefer to use hand washing with soap and water as their main method of hand hygiene.

How can I improve my hand hygiene in public settings?

Small bottles of alcohol hand rub can be safely carried with you.

What is the proper way to use the hand rub?

Pump a thumbnail sized amount of product into one of your hands. Rub hands together vigorously until the solution is dry. Remember your nails, and all sides of your fingers and your wrist.

What other things can I do to prevent infections?

Ensure that you are immunized. Ensure that you are getting enough rest, good nutrition and exercise.

Do not smoke. Stay home when you are ill. When you cough or sneeze, use a tissue and discard it right away. If one isn't available try to sneeze or cough into your shoulder or elbow.

Avoid eating, touching your face (including your eyes) or placing your fingers in your mouth without first washing or sanitizing your hands.

Consider alternatives to the 'handshake' greeting or be sure to perform hand hygiene afterwards.

If you have any questions, please contact the Communicable Disease and Sexual Health Services at the Middlesex-London Health Unit at 519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to [www. healthunit.com](http://www.healthunit.com)