



Briefing

Hand washing “single most important thing” to reduce common illnesses

Public services come under severe pressure every winter with people suffering from common illnesses such as colds and flu.

Good hand washing can significantly reduce the spread of colds and flu as well as a virus called Norovirus (also known as winter vomiting) which can seriously affect the running of hospitals and care homes.

In addition, common illnesses such as flu can significantly increase absenteeism in the workplace during the winter months, putting added pressure on organisations and employees who have to cover extra work.

NHS North Yorkshire and York has launched a campaign to encourage people to wash their hands following the six step technique recommended by infection control professionals.

Dr Phil Kirby, Interim Director of Public Health at NHS North Yorkshire and York, said: “The most common way germs are spread is on your hands. Germs are often harmless but they can cause illnesses such as colds, flu and stomach upset.

“Proper hand washing with soap and warm water is the single most important thing you can do to help reduce the spread of infection and help protect yourself, your family and those around you.”

To help illustrate the six step techniques of good hand washing, NHS North Yorkshire and York has launched a short video to demonstrate how it’s done. It can be found via the PCT’s website at www.nyypct.nhs.uk

Hand washing – why it’s so important

Visiting hospitals or care homes

When visiting a friend or relative in hospital or other environments where healthcare is provided, it is important to ensure that you wash your hands or use an alcohol handrub to help prevent the spread of infection.

Norovirus, also known as winter vomiting disease or gastric flu, is a common form of sickness and diarrhoea which can spread rapidly in any healthcare setting which can

result in the temporary closure of hospital wards and care homes. The spread of Norovirus can be prevented by good hand washing.

Carers of vulnerable people

For those people who care for friends or relatives, it is important that hand washing is undertaken properly. This will help to significantly reduce the risk of passing on germs to someone who may be more susceptible to infection.

Children

Parents have a vital role to play as children need to be taught the importance of washing their hands properly. Encouraging children to wash their hands will help to ensure that this practice becomes a lifelong habit.

When you need to wash your hands:

- Before and after preparing food.
- Before meal times.
- After using the toilet or changing nappies.
- Whenever hands are visibly dirty.
- Before and after providing care to a patient/vulnerable person.
- Before and after visiting a healthcare setting.
- After you cough, sneeze or blow your nose.
- After touching pets or their waste.

Facts about hand hygiene and washing hands

- Sickness absence costs employers £495 a year in direct costs for every worker employed. Indirect costs are probably considerably more (CBI 2005 statistics)
- Norovirus – a common form of sickness and diarrhoea can result in individuals being off work for up to four days
- Handwashing is the best way to avoid colds, flu and other viruses (Professor John Oxford, of London's Queen Mary's School of Medicine, and various others)
- Up to half of all men and a quarter of women fail to wash their hands after they've been to the toilet
- We have between 2 and 10 million bacteria between fingertip and elbow
- The number of germs on your fingertips doubles after you use the toilet
- Germs can stay alive on hands for up to three hours

Source: www.wash-hands.com

Please note: this is a public-facing campaign, and the hand washing guidance we are giving is not as thorough as that which should be followed by health care professionals.