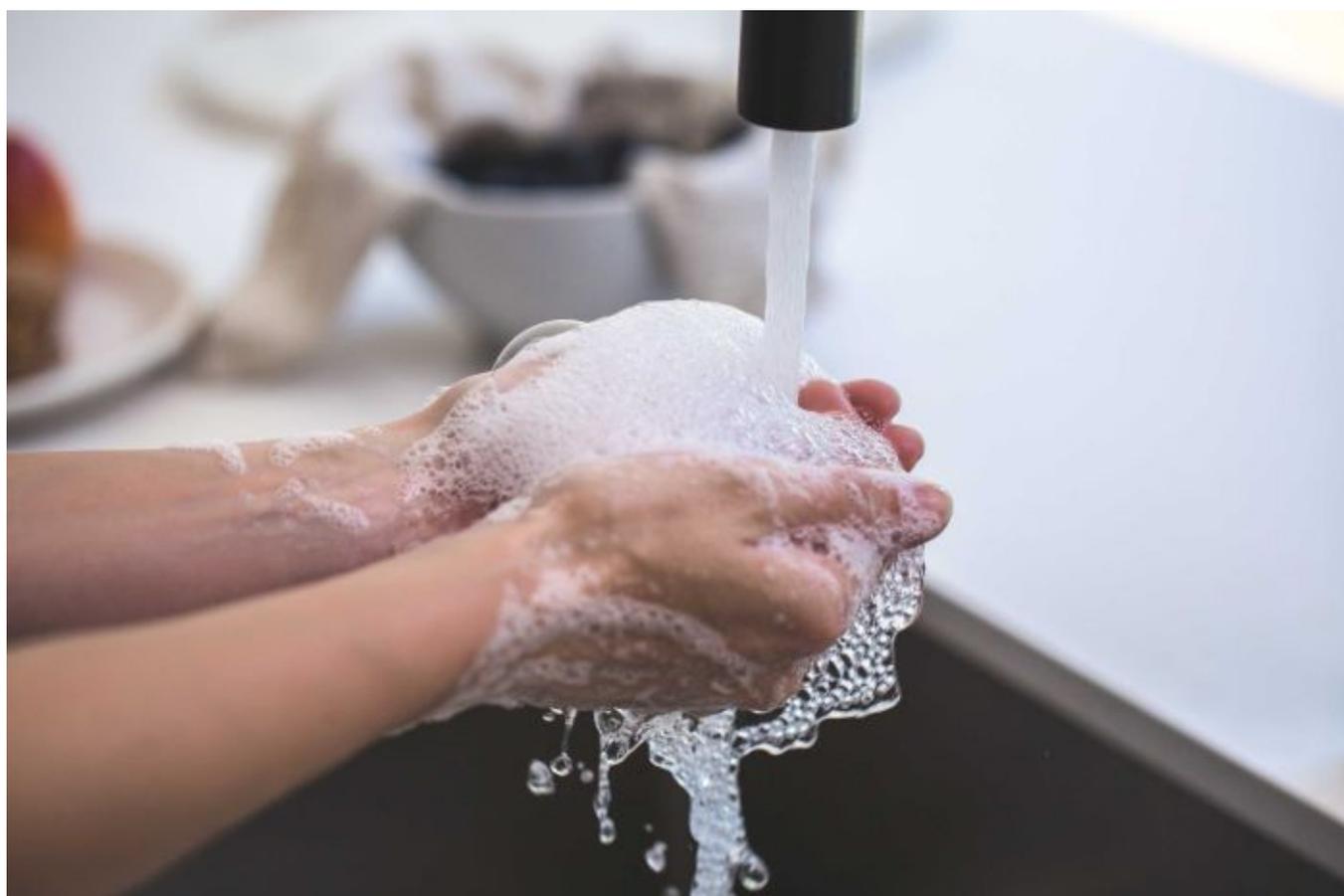


As coronavirus spreads, what you need to know about handwashing and the power of simple soap and water

[Olivia Willis](#) Posted 4 minutes ago



Handwashing works, but it needs to be done right.

(Pexels)

Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, health authorities have been urging us to pay attention to our hand hygiene — and for good reason.

Washing your hands with soap and water is one of our cheapest forms of infection control, and also one of the most effective.

It significantly helps to prevent and slow the spread of infection.

With cases of [COVID-19 expected to climb](#) in the coming weeks and months, handwashing is one way we can each play our part in helping to slow or reduce the spread of the virus — and protect ourselves and others.

To slow the spread, it's time to focus on washing your hands. Frequently. Thoroughly. To the tune of "Happy Birthday" — twice! Here's why.

How hands spread coronavirus

Coronavirus is believed to be mostly spread via respiratory droplets — the little secretions we generate when we sneeze or cough.

The virus can be passed on when a person who is infected coughs or sneezes, and small virus-laden droplets land on the people or surfaces around them.

COVID-19 is spread through direct close contact with a person who is infected. That includes standing close to them and breathing in droplets that they have coughed or sneezed into the air.

But you can also catch coronavirus by touching surfaces that have been contaminated by droplets when they land.

Research shows these can last on surfaces for days.

When to wash

This is where handwashing comes in.

For the virus to infect you, it needs to make its way inside certain cells in your body. In the case of coronavirus, that's via your mouth, nose or eyes.

That means that even if you get the virus on your hands, you can avoid becoming infected by washing your hands before you touch your face.

With this in mind, it's a good idea to wash your hands more frequently than usual.

So, head to the sink and start lathering:

- after you blow your nose, cough or sneeze
- after you have had close physical contact with anyone who is unwell
- after you use the toilet (especially as evidence suggests SARS-CoV-2 may spread via faecal transmission)
- before and after you eat
- before, during and after you prepare food
- after you feed or touch a pet.

Experts also say you should wash your hands after visiting public spaces, to remove any germs you may have picked up from contaminated surfaces, such as those frequently touched on public transport, in shopping centres, or in gyms.

Do it right

In addition to washing your hands more often, you also need to make sure you wash them thoroughly.

To get properly germ-free hands, you need to lather them up with soap, and scrub for at least 20 seconds (about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice) under clean, running water.

"Get your hands wet, lather up, and keep lathering all the surfaces of your hands, particularly your finger tips and around your nails, then rinse off," said Mary-Louise McLaws, an infection control expert from the University of New South Wales.

Don't worry too much about the temperature of the water. But in public bathrooms, try to use paper towel to turn off the tap, as well as to help you open the bathroom door when leaving.

Drying matters

Drying your hands properly is also important, Professor McLaws said.

"The friction of a hand towel, whether it's paper or cloth ... removes germs if you haven't removed them with the soap and water," she said.

In public bathrooms, a paper towel is your best bet.

When that's not an option, using a hand dryer or letting them air dry is OK, so long as you allow your hands to properly dry.

At home, if you're using hand towels in the bathroom, it's important to wash them regularly. If someone at home is sick, it's best they use their own towel.

Why soap is best, then sanitizer

SARS-CoV-2 is what's known as an "envelope virus", which means it's relatively easy to kill compared to some other viruses, Professor McLaws said.

Coronavirus particles are surrounded by a fatty outer layer (made up of lipid molecules) called an envelope, which falls apart on contact with soap.

The idea of handwashing, she said, is not to kill the germs, but to remove them from your hand.

"Soap and water will definitely remove [the virus] from your hands if you lather up."

Whether it's liquid soap or bar soap doesn't matter too much, she said, as long as it lathers well.

When there's no water at hand, a hand sanitiser or gel that contains at least 60 per cent alcohol is your best bet. It should also be rubbed in for about 20 seconds.

"If that is used correctly, it should keep you safe, as long as you put enough in the palm of your hands, and you cover all the surfaces of both hands, particularly your fingertips," Professor McLaws said.

Given all the handwashing in recent weeks, you might find your hands are dryer than normal.

So it's worth noting, hand-cream or lotion is safe to use, so long as it's applied after you wash your hands.

"As long as you've already removed potential pathogens and germs ... you can care for your hands with lotion," Professor McLaws said.

Helping to protect others

Beyond your hands, it's a good idea to clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.

This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, benchtops, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, and sinks.

As is the case for colds and flus, avoid close contact with people who are sick.

And for now, the Department of Health recommends everyone avoid physical contact with others when possible.

If you're unwell, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze (or use

the inside of your elbow), and throw used tissues in the bin.

If you're feeling sick, you should seek medical attention, but be aware that most people currently experiencing cold and flu symptoms won't have COVID-19.

