

Fight illness, wash your hands

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It's that time of year again. Cold and flu season is creeping up on us; two infections commonly spread through hand-to-hand contact. Many gastrointestinal disorders are also spread via the hands.

The simplest and most effective way to prevent them: Wash your hands.

You probably just had a flashback of your mother saying those very same words to you countless times. You would think that something this basic would be practiced regularly by everyone.

As noted in the Harvard Medical School newsletter, a study by the American Society for Microbiology determined that 83 percent of people washed their hands after using the restroom.

Furthermore, female physicians washed their hands after 88 percent of patient contacts while only 54 percent of male doctors did.

Since health care personnel have the potential to carry the most dangerous bacteria on their hands, advocate for yourselves by making sure they wash thoroughly before treating you.

Although antibacterial soaps are advertised as superior, they have not been proven to be any more effective than plain regular soap. Antibacterial wipes or towelettes, though not quite as effective as soap and water, are convenient when traveling and are considered a reasonable alternative.

According to the experts at Harvard Medical School and the Mayo Clinic, alcohol-based hand sanitizers are the most effective in killing bacteria and viruses that cause disease. These are waterless hand rubs usually in gel form and should contain 60 percent to 95 percent isopropanol or ethanol.

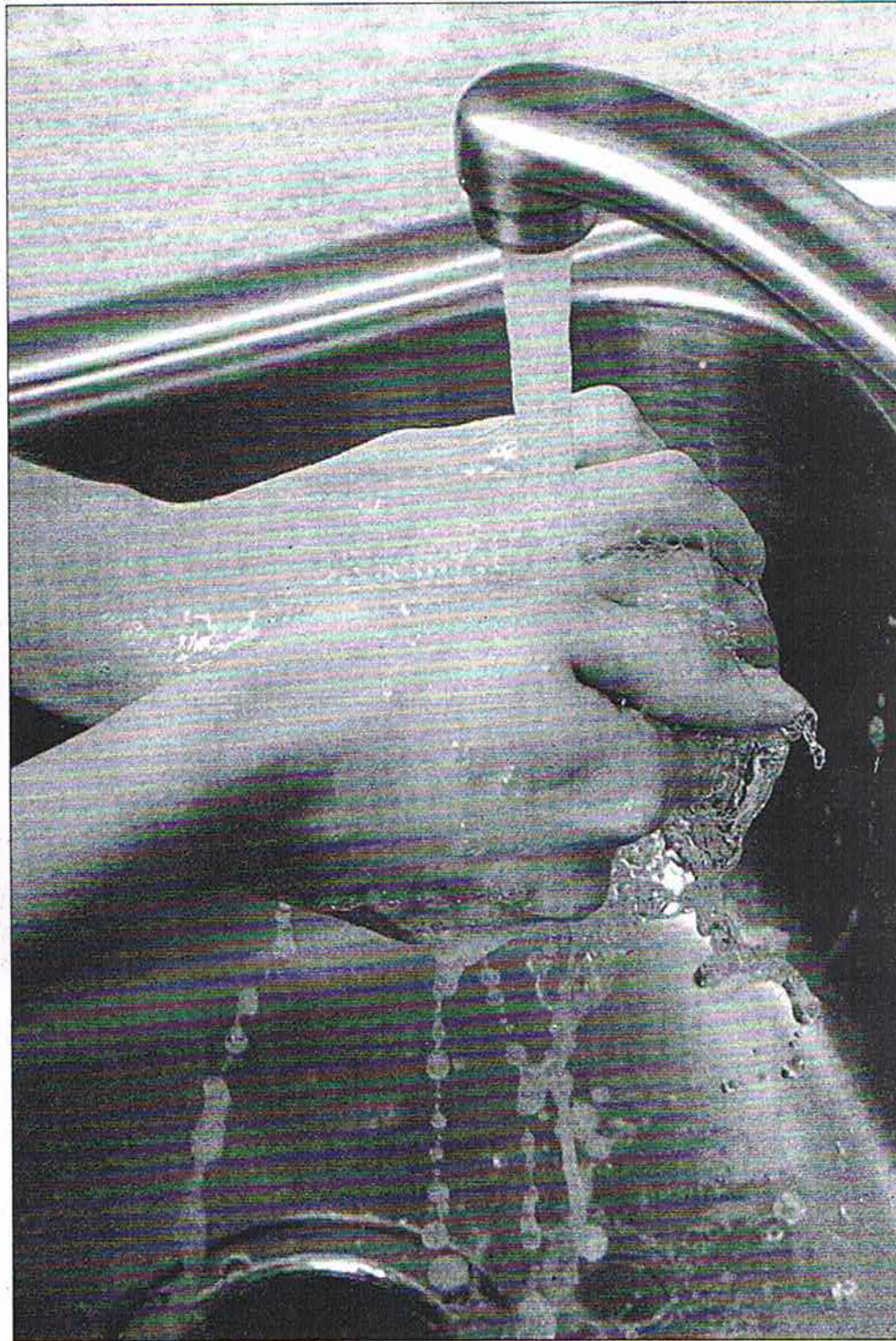
These products are being used increasingly in medical settings and studies have shown that due to their ease and convenience of use, medical personnel are more compliant with using them. They can also be easier on the skin because hot water and soap can often cause dryness and cracking, allowing bacteria to sneak into tissue.

Although most of you think you know the correct way to wash your hands, there is washing, and then there is effective washing.

Read on: Wet your hands with warm running water and apply soap. Lather well and rub your hands vigorously together for at least 15 seconds, scrubbing all surfaces of your hands, wrists, and fingers.

Rinse well, dry your hands with a disposable towel if possible and use the towel when turning off the faucet. If you're in a public restroom, keep the towel and use it to open the door to get out.

If using an alcohol-based sanitizer, apply about a half teaspoon to the palm of your hands and rub briskly covering all surfaces as just discussed until they are dry. If they are dry in less than 15 seconds, you did not apply



Contributed photo

Singing the ABCs can help kids make washing hands a fun experience.

enough; and if it takes more than 30 seconds, you probably applied too much.

In today's world, the fear of infections has taken on heightened significance.

You can do much to maintain health by making effective hand washing a habit.

If hands are visibly dirty, opt for soap and water rather than hand sanitizer. Teach kids

by example to adopt good hand washing habits and supervise their techniques. Young children should wash as long as it takes them to sing their ABCs. If your kids are in day care, inquire about how much they are encouraged to wash. Hang a sign over your hospital bed saying, "Thank you for washing your hands."