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Stay healthy this fall by washing your hands

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It's more important than you think

Parents often feel like they're constantly reminding their children to wash their hands, whether they're leaving the bathroom, on the way home from the playground or sitting down for dinner after playing with the family dog.

But are enough parents taking their own advice?



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“Kids aren’t the only ones absentmindedly putting their hands into their mouth, and washing your hands for just 20 seconds can stop the cold or flu,” said Dr. Christian Shuman, a Geisinger family physician. “It’s is an easy way to protect ourselves from many common illnesses, while also slowing the spread to others.”

Proper hand washing is defined as a vigorous 20-second scrub with soap and warm water that extends beyond the hands to the wrists, between the fingers and under the fingernails. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommends that you avoid touching the faucet or bathroom door with newly cleaned hands and instead use a paper towel.

“Germs are more resilient than we think,” said Dr. Shuman. “A short rinse or scrub without soap may leave some illness-causing germs behind.” Plus, our hands act as carriers for the germs, transporting them between surfaces.

How you can be infected

- **Germ-covered surfaces:** Those resilient germs that will survive a brief wash can also survive a light cleaning. Public spaces like trains, subways, buses, hotel lobbies and taxi cabs are a major source of germs, as well as our own kitchens and bathrooms. This is why it's important to clean with a disinfectant.

Without regular hand washing, germs can get into your body while eating or drinking.

- **Face, meet hands:** We often touch our face, eyes, nose and mouth without even thinking about it during the day. This contact releases the germs into our body, challenging the immune system.

“Nail biting is a common problem for many adults, and that act gives germs a bridge from your hands to your mouth,” said Dr. Shuman. “While breaking this habit can take time, keeping your hands clean is a good first step.”

- **Uncovered cough:**
Germs can become airborne thanks to an uncovered cough or sneeze, leaving them on surfaces, clothing or causing us to breathe them in.

Illnesses passed from unclean hands

- **Common colds** are the most common cause of sick days in both adults and children. Most people get colds in the winter and spring, but they can come year-round and are marked by seven to 10 days of sore throat, coughing, sneezing, headaches and body aches. However, they can be prevented with a few more seconds at the bathroom sink.

“Research suggests that as many as 45 percent of colds can be prevented with regular hand washing,” said Dr. Shuman.

- **The flu**, caused by the influenza virus, is often mistaken for the common cold. The two viruses share symptoms like coughing, runny nose and body aches. However, the flu comes

on much faster, lasts longer and can come with serious complications. If you suspect you have the flu, be sure to contact your doctor.

- **Stomach bugs**, most commonly caused by the Norovirus germ, are marked by the sudden onset of symptoms like vomiting and diarrhea. The bug is most commonly caused by cross-contamination from food and cooking surfaces.

“In addition to washing hands, properly washing food and kitchen surfaces will help prevent stomach bugs,” said Dr. Shuman.

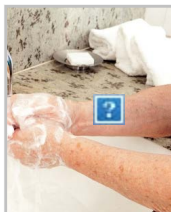
In all, if you aren't near a sink, hand sanitizer is an acceptable option for fighting germs on your hands, but make sure the formula is over 60 percent alcohol.

[Christian Shuman](#), MD, is a primary care physician at Pottsville. To schedule an appointment with Dr. Shuman or another primary care physician, please call 570-624-4444 or visit [geisinger.org](#).



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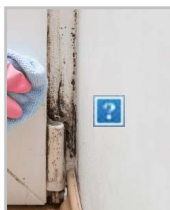
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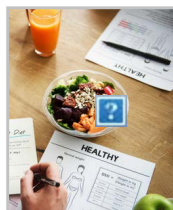
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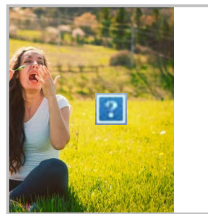
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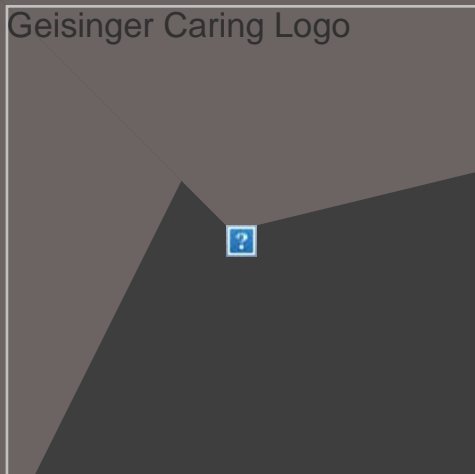
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