

Flu Prevention Tip: Clean Your Hands

If you've got the urge to clean away flu germs, the best place to start is with your hands.

"Covering your mouth and washing your hands are the two most important ways to stop the spread of the flu," Perl tells WebMD.

What should you wash with? You might assume that antibacterial soap would be preferable, but that's the not the case. First of all, flu is caused by a virus, not bacteria. Second, any type of soap will do.

"Time and thoroughness are what matters when it comes to washing your hands," says Schaffner. "Not the type of soap." It's the scrubbing that counts. You're not killing the virus with soap so much as dislodging it from your skin and sending it down the sink drain.

The CDC recommends that you wash your hands for the length of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice, about 15 to 20 seconds. Schaffner says that while 30 seconds would be ideal, he admits that this isn't always possible.

"I've timed myself, and that can seem like a really long time," Schaffner says. While it's still a good goal, at the very least make sure that you've covered the surface of both hands and done it vigorously.

What about alcohol-based hand sanitizers? Flu experts are enthusiastic.

"I love the stuff," Perl tells WebMD. She observes that one of its main advantages is that you can use it on the go, far away from sink. Just rub it in until it's dry, she says, which usually takes just ten seconds or so.

"Gels are just as effective as soap and water at killing influenza virus," says Schaffner. "We like both of them."

Killing Flu Germs Around the Home and Office

Even if it may be an unlikely mode of transmission, it's still *conceivable* that you could pick up the flu bug from a surface. So if you'd like, you can disinfect some of the areas in your home and office that are most likely to harbor flu germs.

While flu germs can theoretically be spread by sheets or towels, it's unlikely: Influenza can only live a few minutes on soft surfaces. (Still, it's best to not share hand towels or anything else with someone who has the flu.) Influenza germs tend to last longest on hard surfaces, so you could focus on:

- Doorknobs
- Hand rails
- Desks
- Tables
- Faucets
- Computer keyboards and mice
- Remote controls
- Video game controllers
- Elevator buttons
- Toys

What type of cleaner should you use? "Really, any disinfectant will do the job," says Schaffner. One common recommendation is a 1/2 cup of bleach mixed with a gallon of hot water.

Of course, if you have kids, all the precautions in the world may not be enough.

"Children are flu factories," says Hay. "And with little kids, it's almost impossible to stop them from sharing viruses with one another and bringing them home." Even though day care centers may wash the toys and surfaces with bleach, it's very hard to keep up.

What can a parent do? Aside from making sure your children get the flu vaccine, not a whole lot. Even hearty adults who haven't been sick in decades are generally laid low once they have children, Schaffner says. Just consider it another cost of parenthood.

Keeping Perspective About the Flu

If you want to, you can spray your telephones with disinfectant and scrub your keyboards with bleach-soaked cotton swabs every day of flu season. But don't get so focused on disinfecting surfaces that you neglect the three most important things you can do to keep flu germs out of your life.

- Regularly wash your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth when you cough, preferably with something other than your hand