Wash hands the right way

By Dr. Saima A. Khan

There is a panicked person in my office at least once a day asking about how not to catch the latest viral infection, be it influenza or the coronavirus. My answer: remain calm and wash your hands often, especially at certain key times and the right way. Hand washing is the single most effective way to stop the spread of disease.

Many people do not realize that the point of washing is not to kill the viruses and bacteria that are on your hands but to simply get them off of your hands, to literally wash them away. Hand sanitizers and antibacterial soaps do kill germs, but that is not necessary to avoid getting sick.

Soap creates a slippery medium, making it easier to remove the germs. Here is the proper way: wet your hands, apply enough soap to make a good lather, and then rub your hands, including the palms and the back of the hands. Interlink your fingers and clean between them off — so dry well and thoroughly with a clean towel.

Key times to wash your hands include:

1. After touching anything that may have viruses on it (door knobs, countertops, etc.)
2. Before and after touching your face (eyes, nose, mouth)
3. After using the restroom, including the toilet, sink, paper towel dispenser, etc.
4. After sneezing, coughing, or touching your face
5. After eating
6. After playing with animals
7. After taking care of someone who is sick
8. After handling raw meat or pet food
9. After handling mail, packages, or post directly from the mail carrier
10. After touching a public surface (escalators, door handles, etc.)

Finally, when you dry your hands, you remove any remaining germs, so do not let them slide off and go down the sink. Sing “Happy Birthday” twice. Then rinse your fingers, including the fingertips, for 20 seconds, the amount of time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice. Then rinse your hands, enveloping all those germs sliding off and going down the sink.

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