

How to Protect Yourself From Bird Flu and Other Infections by Washing Your Hands -- the Right Way

OK, so I sound like your mother -- I accept that. Only I'm worse than your mother, because I want you to wash your hands more often than your mother did.

And for a longer time and more thoroughly.

If and when bird flu mutates into a virus that's contagious between people, we can expect it to spread as easily as ordinary influenza, and the same way ordinary flu does

Ordinary flu (and colds too) spreads primarily in two ways: contact spread and airborne spread.

Airborne spread means that somebody sheds virus by coughing or sneezing, and the small droplets containing the virus hang in the air, and you breath them in. They can hang there for fifteen minutes or more before drifting to the ground.

Experts disagree about whether contact spread or airborne spread causes more new infections of colds and flu.

It's a fact that you can dramatically reduce your chances of catching bird flu, ordinary flu, colds and other commons infections such as caliciviruses which causes nausea (stomach flu) by washing your hands to eliminate the risk of contact spread.

It's true washing your hands won't help you if a bird flu patient sneezes into your face, so avoid that!

Contact spread means the passing along of germs by simple touch. Influenza viruses can live outside a human body for hours. H5N1 bird flu can possibly survive on the outside for days.

So it's entirely possible that one of your co-workers can be infected but not even know it yet. They work at a computer keyboard. They shed some H5N1 viruses onto the keys. You sit down at the keyboard several hours later and do some work. You don't know it, but bird flu is on your hands.

Now, at this stage, the H5N1 is harmless. It cannot pass through the skin of your hands. That's the good news.

The bad news is that most of us touch our hands to our faces every 30 seconds or so. You put your hand on your chin to think. You scratch your nose. You rub your eyes. You chew your fingernail.

That's when the bird flu virus can infect you. It goes from your hands into your body through your mouth, nose and eyes. Then infects your respiratory tract and in a few days you're coughing.

That's why it's so important to wash your hands often in the best of times, more often during ordinary cold and flu season, and compulsively during a bird flu pandemic.

You may think there's no need for this article. Think again. Researchers once ran an experiment in the public restrooms of Grand Central Station. They installed cameras to observe how many people washed their hands after doing their business. They observed hundreds of men and women of every social class, economic class, race and ethnicity -- from the homeless to the wealthy.

60% failed to wash their hands at all!

Under 10% washed their hands thoroughly.

Almost nobody washed their hands thoroughly and then avoided touching the rest room surfaces before leaving.

You should wash your hands after using the bathroom and before meals, as your mother taught you. You should also wash your hands occasionally during the day. Especially after shaking hands with someone (when it's polite to do so, of course), after you've been handling anybody else's things (such as using someone else's pens or computer keyboard), after you've coughed or sneezed, after preparing dishes while cooking -- and even more often during the regular flu and cold season and throughout a bird flu pandemic.

Don't become as crazy as Howard Hughes in old age, but do wash your hands often, the proper way.

Use soap and water. Water should be a comfortable temperature. When it's too cold it won't dissolve the soap as easily. Too hot and of course it'll burn you.

Lather up well and rub the soap all over your hands and fingers, including under your fingernails, for twenty to thirty seconds. Rinse. Repeat.

In public restrooms, don't touch any surfaces with your now clean hands. Turn off faucet with paper towel. Push door open with paper towel.

In some places (such as where I work), there's no soap available, only a lotion of the germicide triclosan.

Scientists disagree about using triclosan. Some believe it's a harmful chemical. Some believe it encourages resistance to germicides in the germs. Some believe it upset the balance of natural germs on our skin.

If you have a choice, scrub your hands thoroughly with soap and water. If you have no choice, just use the triclosan. Chances are you won't even notice.

Some of the same arguments apply to germicide hands lotions made from isopropyl alcohol, which you find stores full of during the Fall beginning of flu season. Except that some people say that when the alcohol evaporates it dries the skin of your hands creating small cracks that allow more dirt inside your skin.

Therefore, I use my hand lotion of isopropyl alcohol only when I feel my hands are so dirty that I want some extra protection besides a thorough scrubbing of soap and water. Hey, sometimes that happens after I use the toilet.

And during a bird flu pandemic -- I'm applying that germicide hand lotion ten times a day, cracks in the skin or no cracks in the skin. Especially if I've touched anyone or handled any objects that may have been exposed to anybody else.

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About the Author

c 2006 by Richard Stoker Richard Stoker is the author of How to Protect Yourself and Your Family From Bird Flu
<http://www.BirdFluProtectionHome.com/> <http://preparationsbirdflu.blogspot.com/>