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| Title | Effective hand hygiene—wash your hands and reduce the risk |
| Type | Article |
| URL | https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/31367/ |
| DOI | 10.12968/bjon.2020.29.1.10 |
| Date | 2020 |
| Citation | Ridley, Neesha (2020) Effective hand hygiene—wash your hands and reduce the risk. <i>British Journal of Nursing</i> , 29 (1). ISSN 0966-0461 |
| Creators | Ridley, Neesha |

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
10.12968/bjon.2020.29.1.10

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The importance of effective hand hygiene – wash your hands and reduce the risk!

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Hand hygiene is considered one of the most effective ways of reducing healthcare associated infections (Gould et al, 2017). Thousands of people die every day around the world from infections acquired while receiving health care and as many as 1.4 million patients around the world develop healthcare associated infections each year. Many of these infections can be prevented by good hand hygiene (Luangasanatip et al, 2015). Hand hygiene can be performed either with soap and water or with alcohol hand rubs, which are now widely available in all health care settings (RCN, 2019). Hand hygiene should be performed at the five points of care, as identified by the World Health Organisation (2009a), to reduce the spread of bacteria and viruses and ultimately improve the health for the patients that we care for. Hand hygiene should take place before clean or aseptic procedures, after body fluid exposure, after touching a patient and after touching patient surroundings. Alcohol hand rubs can be used however if your hands are visibly dirty, washing with soap and water is the preferred method (WHO, 2009a).

In my previous role as lead for infection prevention and control for maternity, I worked closely with infection prevention and control team to increase the awareness of the importance of hand hygiene. I worked with healthcare workers within the maternity services, educating them about the importance of effective hand hygiene. I completed audits, delivered training to midwives and other health care workers within the maternity settings, sharing best practice guidelines to improve health for the patients we cared for. Understanding the importance of handwashing with soap or hand rubs is an effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and hand hygiene is the key to reducing health care associated infections in all health care settings. Direct hand contact between patients and healthcare workers is known to be the primary cause of many health care associated infections and many health care workers miss opportunities on a regular basis to complete hand hygiene to reduce this risk.

In 1847, an Obstetrician named Semmelweis observed a higher rate of maternal mortality when women were cared for by Doctors. He hypothesised that an increase in death rates was related to Doctors not washing their hands effectively, following the performance of autopsies in the mortuary. This research had significant findings for health care workers because it showed a direct link between hand washing and a decline in infection rates (Best & Neuhauser, 2004). However, it was not until much later that the validity of Semmelweis's research was recognised. Even in today's health care settings, many health care workers are unaware of the importance of effective hand

hygiene. The World Health Organisation (2009b) have recognised that poor adherence to recommended hand hygiene measures during routine patient care is still an issue, with health care workers cleaning their hands less than half of the times they should. The WHO (2009b) found that the higher the demand for hand hygiene (in areas such as intensive care), the lower the uptake and adherence to the recommendations, putting patients at risk.

One issue that I am aware of, is the increasing demands on nurses and midwives to comply with new guidelines, updated policies and increasing paperwork. Basic measures such as hand hygiene often get forgotten in the middle of this increasing workload. However, when done properly, good hand hygiene can be one of the simplest and most effective ways to prevent transmission of bacteria and viruses, preventing health care associated infections. Conversations around good hand washing practices with patients and their families is also important. Informing patients of when and how to wash their hands, will allow them to protect themselves when at home and in health care settings and will let patients know that it is ok to ask about hand hygiene from those caring for them.

In 2011, it was recognised by CMACE that sepsis was a leading cause of maternal mortality for the first time in the history of this significant report. In the modern healthcare system within the UK, sepsis should not be a leading cause of maternal mortality and it appears that the rate of sepsis related deaths has decreased, through educating women about washing their hands before and after visiting the toilet together with making women aware of the sign of sepsis (CMACE, 2011). However, globally, infections are still a leading cause of death in neonates and children under five years of age (Kuti et al, 2019). Direct patient contact and contamination from health care workers and family members is often a source of infection, however education around effective hand hygiene practices will reduce the risk and incidence of infection and ultimately contribute to ending preventable deaths of newborns and children under five years of age, in line with the United Nations sustainable development goals (2017).

Regular and effective hand hygiene is the single-most important thing you can do to protect yourself and others from infection. Health care workers play a central role in ensuring that the patients we care for are safe, and that all families have the information needed to prevent the risk of infection. Wash your hands and do not be afraid to ask others to wash their hands too, together we can reduce the risk of infection and the spread of bacteria.

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