

Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control

Guidelines for Infection Control in Dental
Health-Care Settings – 2003*

(*excerpt from full report and recommendations, references omitted)

REPORT

Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene (e.g., handwashing, hand antisepsis, or surgical hand antisepsis) substantially reduces potential pathogens on the hands and is considered the single most critical measure for reducing the risk of transmitting organisms to patients and health care personnel (HCP). Hospital-based studies have demonstrated that noncompliance with hand hygiene practices is associated with health-care--associated infections and the spread of multiresistant organisms. Noncompliance also has been a major contributor to outbreaks. The prevalence of health-care--associated infections decreases as adherence of HCP to recommended hand hygiene measures improves.

The microbial flora of the skin, first described in 1938, consist of transient and resident microorganisms. Transient flora, which colonize the superficial layers of the skin, are easier to remove by routine handwashing. They are often acquired by HCP during direct contact with patients or contaminated environmental surfaces; these organisms are most frequently associated with health-care--associated infections. Resident flora attached to deeper layers of the skin are more resistant to removal and less likely to be associated with such infections.

The preferred method for hand hygiene depends on the type of procedure, the degree of contamination, and the desired persistence of antimicrobial action on the skin ([Table 2](#)).

For routine dental examinations and nonsurgical procedures, handwashing and hand antisepsis is achieved by using either a plain or antimicrobial soap and water. If the hands are not visibly soiled, an alcohol-based hand rub is adequate.

The purpose of surgical hand antisepsis is to eliminate transient flora and reduce resident flora for the duration of a procedure to prevent introduction of organisms in the operative wound, if gloves become punctured or torn. Skin bacteria can rapidly multiply under surgical gloves if hands are washed with soap that is not antimicrobial. Thus, an antimicrobial soap or alcohol hand rub with persistent activity should be used before surgical procedures.

Agents used for surgical hand antisepsis should substantially reduce microorganisms on intact skin, contain a nonirritating antimicrobial preparation, have a broad spectrum of activity, be fast-acting, and have a persistent effect. Persistence (i.e., extended antimicrobial activity that prevents or inhibits survival of microorganisms after the product is applied) is critical because microorganisms can colonize on hands in the moist environment underneath gloves.

Alcohol hand rubs are rapidly germicidal when applied to the skin but should include such antiseptics as chlorhexidine, quaternary ammonium compounds, octenidine, or triclosan to achieve persistent activity. Factors that can influence the effectiveness of the surgical hand antisepsis in addition to the choice of antiseptic agent include duration and technique of scrubbing, as well as condition of the hands, and techniques used for drying and gloving. CDC's 2002 guideline on hand hygiene in health-care settings provides more complete information.

Selection of Antiseptic Agents

Selecting the most appropriate antiseptic agent for hand hygiene requires consideration of multiple factors. Essential performance characteristics of a product (e.g., the spectrum and persistence of activity and whether or not the agent is fast-acting) should be determined before selecting a product. Delivery system, cost per use, reliable vendor support and supply are also considerations.

Because HCP acceptance is a major factor regarding compliance with recommended hand hygiene protocols, considering dental health care personnel (DHCP) needs is critical and should include possible chemical allergies, skin integrity after repeated use, compatibility with lotions used, and offensive agent ingredients (e.g., scent). Discussing specific preparations or ingredients used for hand antisepsis is beyond the scope of this report. DHCP should choose from commercially available HCP handwashes when selecting agents for hand antisepsis or surgical hand antisepsis.

Storage and Dispensing of Hand Care Products

Handwashing products, including plain (i.e., nonantimicrobial) soap and antiseptic products, can become contaminated or support the growth of microorganisms. Liquid products should be stored in closed containers and dispensed from either disposable containers or containers that are washed and dried thoroughly before refilling. Soap should not be added to a partially empty dispenser, because this practice of topping off might lead to bacterial contamination. Store and dispense products according to manufacturers' directions.

Lotions

The primary defense against infection and transmission of pathogens is healthy, unbroken skin. Frequent handwashing with soaps and antiseptic agents can cause chronic irritant contact dermatitis among DHCP. Damage to the skin changes skin flora, resulting in more frequent colonization by staphylococci and gram-negative bacteria. The potential of detergents to cause skin irritation varies considerably, but can be reduced by adding emollients. Lotions are often recommended to ease the dryness resulting from frequent handwashing and to prevent dermatitis from glove use. However, petroleum-based lotion formulations can weaken latex gloves and increase permeability. For that reason, lotions that contain petroleum or other oil emollients should only be used at the end of the work day. Dental practitioners should obtain information from lotion manufacturers regarding interaction between lotions, gloves, dental materials, and antimicrobial products.

Fingernails and Artificial Nails

Although the relationship between fingernail length and wound infection is unknown, keeping nails short is considered key because the majority of flora on the hands are found under and around the fingernails. Fingernails should be short enough to allow DHCP to thoroughly clean underneath them and prevent glove tears. Sharp nail edges or broken nails are also likely to increase glove failure. Long artificial or natural nails can make donning gloves more difficult and can cause gloves to tear more readily. Hand carriage of gram-negative organisms has been determined to be greater among wearers of artificial nails than among nonwearers, both before and after handwashing. In addition, artificial fingernails or extenders have been epidemiologically implicated in multiple outbreaks involving fungal and bacterial infections in hospital intensive-care units and operating rooms. Freshly applied nail polish on natural nails does not increase the microbial load from periungual skin if fingernails are short; however, chipped nail polish can harbor added bacteria.

Jewelry

Studies have demonstrated that skin underneath rings is more heavily colonized than comparable areas of skin on fingers without rings. In a study of intensive-care nurses, multivariable analysis determined rings were the only substantial risk factor for carriage of gram-negative bacilli and *Staphylococcus aureus*, and the concentration of organisms correlated with the number of rings worn. However, two other studies demonstrated that mean bacterial colony counts on hands after handwashing were similar among persons wearing rings and those not wearing rings. Whether wearing rings increases the likelihood of transmitting a pathogen is unknown; further studies are needed to establish whether rings result in higher transmission of pathogens in health-care settings. However, rings and decorative nail jewelry can make donning gloves more difficult and cause gloves to tear more readily. Thus, jewelry should not interfere with glove use (e.g., impair ability to wear the correct-sized glove or alter glove integrity).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hand Hygiene

A. General Considerations

Perform hand hygiene with either a nonantimicrobial or antimicrobial soap and water when hands are visibly dirty or contaminated with blood or other potentially infectious material. If hands are not visibly soiled, an alcohol-based hand rub can also be used. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Indications for hand hygiene include

- a. when hands are visibly soiled;
- b. after barehanded touching of inanimate objects likely to be contaminated by blood, saliva, or respiratory secretions;
- c. before and after treating each patient ;
- d. before donning gloves; and
- e. immediately after removing gloves.

For oral surgical procedures, perform surgical hand antisepsis before donning sterile surgeon's gloves. Follow the manufacturer's instructions by using either an antimicrobial soap and water, or soap and water followed by drying hands and application of an alcohol-based surgical hand-scrub product with persistent activity.

Store liquid hand-care products in either disposable closed containers or closed containers that can be washed and dried before refilling. Do not add soap or lotion to (i.e., top off) a partially empty dispenser.

B. Special Considerations for Hand Hygiene and Glove Use

1. Use hand lotions to prevent skin dryness associated with handwashing.

2. Consider the compatibility of lotion and antiseptic products and the effect of petroleum or other oil emollients on the integrity of gloves during product selection and glove use.
3. Keep fingernails short with smooth, filed edges to allow thorough cleaning and prevent love tears.
4. Do not wear artificial fingernails or extenders when having direct contact with patients at high risk (e.g., those in intensive care units or operating rooms).
5. Use of artificial fingernails is usually not recommended.
6. Do not wear hand or nail jewelry if it makes donning gloves more difficult or compromises the fit and integrity of the glove.