It’s flu and cold season. The news reports highlight how many people are lining up for flu shots, but the simplest thing you can do to protect your health is to wash your hands.

Good hand washing is the first line of defense against the spread of many illnesses, from the common cold to more serious illnesses such as meningitis, bronchiolitis, influenza, hepatitis A, and most types of infectious diarrhea.

As you touch people, surfaces and objects throughout the day, you accumulate germs on your hands. In turn, you can infect yourself with these germs by touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Although it’s impossible to keep your hands germ-free, washing your hands frequently can help limit the transfer of bacteria, viruses and other microbes.

How important is it? Research with children shows the effect of clean hands. A study of 305 Detroit students who washed their hands four times a day showed the 24% had fewer colds and 51% had less stomach upset. When day-care teachers helped kids wash their hands every morning when they arrived, there were 50% fewer illnesses.

Do we wash? When surveyed, 97% of females and 92% of males say they wash their hands after going to the bathroom, but hidden cameras showed that only 75% of females washed and 58% of males washed.

About half of the people interviewed said that they washed their hands 5 to 15 seconds, but that isn’t long enough. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends washing for at least 20 seconds.
Good handwashing technique requires the following steps:

- Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold) and apply soap.
- Rub your hands together to make a lather and scrub them well; be sure to scrub the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
- Continue rubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds. Consider singing the "Happy Birthday" song two times to pass the time.
- Rinse your hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a clean towel or air-dry them.

We can also pick up germs from objects, such as doorknobs and stair railings, touched by other people who aren’t good handwashers. Think about all the things you touch each day and how many people may have touched them before you.

Where are the germiest public places? Think about shopping cart handles, hand rails on stairs and escalators, public restroom sinks (particularly those in airplanes), telephones and desktops in the office, and restaurant tables.

At home, the germiest places are the kitchen sink, cutting boards, stove knobs, cutting boards, pet toys, faucet handles, coffee makers, and your toothbrush. But the germiest items in your house are the sponge and rags that you use to keep your house clean. Microwave wet sponges once a day for two minutes, and replace at least once every two weeks. If you use a rag, toss it in a hot washing cycle every day or two.

Cold and flu season is with us. So carefully washing your hands may allow you to dodge the bullet when it comes to getting sick.

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