Fall is upon us and winter will be close behind. We’ll soon be closed up inside the house or workplace with lots of other folks, sharing cold and flu germs. Not only is a cold or flu uncomfortable, it is expensive. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells us that the flu costs approximately $10.4 billion in hospital stays and doctors’ visits for adults.

One of the best ways to fight germ sharing is to properly wash your hands and do it often. Oct. 15 is Global Handwashing Day. It is the day set aside to remind us to wash our hands for better health.

Handwashing is a do-it-yourself vaccine against sickness. Proper handwashing can keep you healthy.

Research shows us that when children have been taught how to properly wash their hands, they have half the rate of sickness of those who do not wash properly.

Handwashing, without doubt, is the most effective and inexpensive way to prevent the spread of respiratory and intestinal infections. These infections take the lives of millions of children in developing countries and are responsible for the majority of all child deaths.

The steps are simple but crucial for our health. Think of five steps: wet, lather, scrub, rinse and dry.

Wet your hands with warm, running water. Clean running water should be used, because standing water might have been contaminated by prior use. The temperature of the water doesn’t matter for germ removal, but warmer water may allow you to keep your hands in the water longer. Once your hands are wet, turn off the faucet to save water.
Lather your hands with soap. There is no need to use the antibacterial variety, unless you are a health professional. In fact, there is no added health benefit for using antibacterial soap over common soap. Soap, as compared to plain water, more effectively removes germs because of the surfactants that float germs off the surfaces being scrubbed. You are also more likely to scrub longer when you use soap.

Scrub your hands a minimum of 20 seconds. Think of this as the process of friction removing all those germs and microbes from your hands. Sing the happy birthday song twice and you’ll have scrubbed for about 20 seconds.

Rinse your hands again with warm running water to get rid of the soap suds and the accumulated germs and soil.

Dry your hands. Commercial settings such as restaurants or child-care centers specify that you use a paper towel and throw it away. At home, we might use a hand towel, but make sure it is changed often to keep us from sharing those washed-away germs with others in the home. If anyone in the house is sick, be sure to use a paper towel.

Germs are everywhere. Think of all the surfaces you touch in a day and imagine how many other people have touched it before you. Stair rails, doors, phones, desks, cabinet tops and the remote buttons are rife with shared germs. One year when my kids were in high school, they tested surfaces and found that the buttons on the soda machine were the germiest spots in the school. It is impractical to keep all these surfaces sanitized. So washing your hands is the best way you can guard against sickness.

Regular handwashing is the best way to remove germs, avoid sickness and stop the sharing of germs.

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