



Infection control at home

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

Everywhere you look you will find bacteria and viruses

— assuming you are using an appropriately powerful device, of course. They are in the soil beneath your feet, in water, the air and on your skin; they are in bodily fluids, on your pets, and on objects all around you. There is bad news, too. Collectively, these billions of microscopic specs are responsible for most infections you can get.

Most of these microbes are harmless, many are even helpful, but the few that are not can be quite a risk. The various types of microscopic germs such as viruses, bacteria, parasites, fungi can cause illnesses ranging from common ailments like a cold and the flu; to disabling conditions such as Lyme disease and polio; to deadly diseases like Hantavirus and AIDS.

Fortunately there is also some good news. Many of those diseases can be prevented with amazingly simple and inexpensive methods. Some of these we learned as children but we get in a hurry or out of the habit and skip these simple but important preventative steps.

What is the single, simplest preventative tool for fighting back? The answer comes from a Dr Ignaz Semmelweis. Not familiar with his work? He is the one who first demonstrated the value of routine hand washing more than a century ago. Dr Semmelweis worked in a hospital in Vienna whose maternity patients were dying at such an alarming rate that they begged to be sent home. It turns out that most of the dying had been treated by student physicians who worked on cadavers during an anatomy class before beginning their rounds in the maternity ward. Because the students did not wash their hands in between touching the dead, and treating the living, various pathogenic bacteria from the cadavers would be transmitted to their live patients.

Dr Semmelweis began insisting all his students wash their hands before treating the mothers — a quaint experiment in the eyes of his colleagues — and the mortality rate dropped five-fold. That is why your mother always told you to wash your hands.

Your home has multiple places that can be called “hot zones” where handwashing has to be standard practice. The kitchen is one of the most dangerous because of the infectious bacteria that may be found in raw foods like chicken. Also, there is a high potential for spreading the germs as this is where food is prepared.

In general, wash your hands before, during, and after handling raw food, especially poultry and seafood. Keep raw meats away from ready-to-eat foods and never place cooked food back on the plate that held it before cooking — a special note to barbeque fans on this one!

The bathroom is another potential “hot zone,” for obvious reasons. Routine cleaning and disinfection reduces odours and can help prevent spreading germs when someone in the house has a diarrheal illness... don't forget the diaper pail and changing table.

Today's theme has been brought to you by Dr Semmelweis's 100-year-old prescription: Wash your hands. Often.

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