

## Did You Wash Your Hands? / July 2011

Germs, germs everywhere. There are four main types of germs: bacteria, viruses, fungi and protozoa. They invade plants, animals and people alike ... sometimes making us sick.

Bacteria have the ability to reproduce inside or outside of the body. It is the culprit behind sore throats, ear infections and pneumonia to name a few bacteria related infections. Viruses need to be inside living cells to grow and reproduce. Having said that, some can live for a while on door-knobs, tabletops and other objects that might have been touched by an infected person. Viruses cause infections such as the chickenpox, measles and the flu. Fungi flourish in damp warm places causing infections such as athlete's foot, while Protozoa love moisture and are known to spread disease through water leading to a litany of tummy troubles, including diarrhea and nausea.

So how do these invaders get around?

Germs can spread to the hands by touching contaminated surfaces, by sneezing, coughing or rubbing the eyes. The germs may then be passed onto other people. They can also be transmitted from unclean hands to food and onto the person that eats the food, if it is not properly cleaned or cooked. They are transmitted from raw foods such as chicken, to hands, to uncooked foods such as salad. They can also be transmitted from animals to people, after using the toilet or changing a child's diaper. The list goes on.

The good news is that the simple act of washing ones hands is one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of many types of germs and illness in all settings—from your home and workplace to healthcare facilities.

So wash 'em. And wash 'em well. Wet your hands with running water (warm if possible); Apply soap and make a rich lather. Scrub them well - between your fingers, around your thumbs, on the back of your hands and under your nails. Continue scrubbing your hands for at least 15 seconds. You can then rinse them with running water and air dry or use a clean towel.

Simple? Yes! The catch is that many people do not fully grasp the implications of not washing their hands. According to the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, about 250,000 people in Canada, or one out of every nine patients admitted to hospital each year, pick up infections while be-

ing treated for something else. To top it off, each and every year more than 8,000 patients die from those infections.

Albeit a simple action, proper hand hygiene – washing hands with soap and water or sanitizing with an alcohol based product – is (I repeat) one of the most effective ways of preventing healthcare-associated infections. In fact, global research indicates that improvements in hand hygiene within the hospital setting, has the potential to reduce healthcare-associated infection rates by as much as 50 per cent. Now that's a wow!

No wonder the healthcare professionals at Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare (MAHC) make a point of washing their hands at four points of interaction – before the initial patient interaction; before aseptic procedure; after body fluid exposure; and after patient contact. In fact, MAHC's focus on patient and staff safety is unrelenting. Dedication and adherence to infection prevention and control at both hospital sites has led them to a notable milestone. MAHC has been outbreak free for an entire year. This is a tremendous accomplishment.

Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare has also been fortunate to secure funding from the District of Muskoka to further decrease environmental exposures through the establishment of a more cleanable environment. What does that mean? It means MAHC can now invest in additional dedicated hand washing sinks, new microfiber systems to improve the quality of cleaning MAHC does; additional commode chairs to improve the likelihood of having a chair dedicated to each patient; and macerators to enable disposable stool management, all of which help to maintain an outbreak free environment.

So when you enter one of Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare's two hospital sites, remember, it's incredibly important to do your part to prevent germs from spreading. As a basic guideline use soap and water any time your hands are visibly soiled. For all other instances, using the alcohol based hand sanitizers readily available throughout the hospitals is the preferred method of decontaminating your hands. Apply sanitizer when you arrive, before you visit your loved one, after you visit your loved one and when you leave.

It's the right thing to do. Not only will it work in your favour... it may also save a life.

*Alison Withey has 20 years healthcare communications experience and is a member of Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare's Communications Team..*