

Wash Your Hands

Aug 1, 2001 -- A new military study reports that frequent hand-washing results in significantly fewer bouts of respiratory illnesses, which may soon have drill instructors barking at recruits to march, shoot, *and* scrub.

The findings, published in the August issue of *The Journal of Preventive Medicine*, showed that military recruits who washed their hands at least five times a day for one year had 45% fewer bouts of respiratory illnesses, such as the cold, the flu, or pneumonia, compared with the year prior when handwashing was not actively encouraged.

Everyone has millions of germs on their hands. Most of the bugs are harmless, but some can cause illnesses such as colds, flu, or diarrhea.

Without proper hand-washing, these germs get a chance to enter the body and cause infections when people touch their eyes, mouth, nose, or skin cuts. So the regular sessions with soap and water make good sense for enlisted and civilian alike.

"This work augments the growing literature assessing hand-washing outside of healthcare settings and evaluates such an intervention on the largest population described to date," conclude the research team headed by Margaret A.K. Ryan, MD, of the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego.

Respiratory illnesses are the most common cause of lost time from military duty among young servicepeople. Military personnel are at high-risk for respiratory illnesses for many reasons, including the close-contact training environment and the physical and psychological stress of military training.

In the past, researchers have tried many high-tech ways to curb the rate of respiratory illnesses among military recruits, including ultraviolet radiation and dust suppression. But few of these measures were successful.

Enter hand-washing.

Called Operation Stop Cough, the program encouraged handwashing and installed liquid soap dispensers at all sinks in training spaces.

To arrive at their findings, Ryan and colleagues compared the rate of weekly respiratory illness among recruits in 1996 before handwashing was encouraged to rates occurring between 1997 and 1998 after the program was initiated.

While it did cut the number of trips to the clinic for respiratory illnesses, handwashing did not affect the rate of hospitalization for more-severe respiratory illnesses, leading the researchers to speculate that handwashing may be most effective against less-virulent illnesses.

Such vigilant hand-washing may be easier said than done, however, as about half of the participants said they encountered obstacles like time constraints and not enough sinks.

"Hand-washing is one of the main tools that we have at our disposal for prevention and control of infectious diseases," says Joel C. Gaydos, MD, MPH, the director of public health practices at the Department of Defense Global Emerging Infections Surveillance & Response Systems at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Silver Spring, Md.

"It is at the core of what we consider infection control within medical facilities, but we may not be emphasizing as much as we used to because we don't see infectious diseases as the threat that we used to," he tells WebMD. Gaydos wrote an editorial that accompanies the new study.

In general, he says, the attitude is that infectious diseases do occur, and even can be serious at times. But overall, they are under control. So prevention tools may be taken for granted, he says.

According to the American Society for Microbiology, people should wash their hands BEFORE they:

- Prepare or eat food;
- Treat a cut or wound;
- Tend to someone who's sick;
- Put in or take out contact lenses;
- Do any kind of activity that involves putting fingers in or near the mouth, eyes, etc.

They should also wash their hands AFTER they:

- Use the bathroom;
- Handle uncooked foods, especially raw meat;
- Eat;
- Blow their nose, cough or sneeze;
- Handle garbage;
- Tend to someone who's sick;
- Change a diaper;
- Play with or touch a pet, especially reptiles and exotic animals.

http://www.webmd.com/content/Article/34/1728_85243.htm?printing=true