

## THE ART OF HAND WASHING

Quite topical this year is the importance of hand washing. Perhaps now more than ever in our lifetime each of us is slave to the practice of keeping our hands squeaky clean. Truth be told, many of us are also learning the art of hand washing for the very first time. Believe it, yes, there is a correct way to wash our hands.

We are used to a quick turn on of the faucet, splish splashing the hands under the stream of running water, grabbing the soap, lathering it on and rubbing the hands together like they are in a tussle for a few brief seconds, then under the water again this time to remove the 'cloud' of bubbles. Then it's the home stretch when we dry the hands.

With the advent of the corona virus (COVID 19), one of the pearls of wisdom from the local health authority to protect ourselves, our families and communities is the regular washing of our hands, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if facilities for handwashing are not available. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has shared an illustrative chart that details just how proper hand washing is done. Admittedly, it has found itself into the kitchen and bathrooms of many offices and homes.



Those in the know state that after every three applications of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, we should endeavour to wash our hands with soap and water. Hopefully long after the country has gotten over the pandemic we will have adopted this behaviour for a lifetime. Could this be the genesis of a healthier generation of children as they have been weaned on to the habit of toting and using sanitizer?

The health ministry directs we shun contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms. Avoiding sick persons may not entirely be feasible. Households with sick persons have to do double duty to reduce any chance of transmission of diseases. Aside from regular hand washing, there are requirements such as sleeping in another room away from the sick person and sterilising eating utensils.

For us, it will take practice but medics the world over have become proficient at hand washing as a protective mechanism - after all, infection prevention is everyone's responsibility. Speaking of everyone, we must be alert that some within our numbers are more susceptible to illnesses than others, notably the very young and the elderly. The adage "Once a Man, Twice a Child" applies as the guidance is the same.

Parents of newborns and caregivers of the elderly and sick have to be trained that hand washing is to be essentially done before handling the individual or his or her food and their personal items such as clothing. It does not stop there for hand washing is necessary after handling them, cleaning and disposing of their waste, and cleaning any of their personal items.

It cannot be overstated, proper hand washing prevents the spread of infection. Households with babies need to insist on its normalisation. True, a baby's first line of defence against infection comes through breastfeeding, as breastmilk helps the baby build his or her immune system through antibodies (transmitted from the mother). But even breastfed babies contract diseases.

By being acutely aware of simple everyday behaviours or actions, we can make a difference. For example by cleaning our surroundings regularly and reducing our contact with dirty surfaces, we protect ourselves and other persons. It extends beyond the home and to the wider community as diseases that have affected our population are not localised.

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