

Personal hygiene

One of the most effective ways we have to protect ourselves and others from illness is good personal hygiene. This means washing your hands, especially, but also your body. It means being careful not to cough or sneeze on others, cleaning things that you touch if you are unwell, putting items such as tissues (that may have germs) into a bin, and using protection (like gloves or condoms) when you might be at risk of catching an infection.

Personal hygiene, such as bathing, is very much dependent on the culture in which you live. In some cultures, it is expected that you will wash your body at least every day and use deodorants to stop body smells. Other cultures have different expectations.

Body odour

Body smells are caused by a number of factors working in combination, including:

- Chemicals in sweat, including pheromones, which are made by the body and sexually attract (or repel) other people.
- Wastes excreted through the skin, such as metabolised alcohol.
- The actions of bacteria that live on the skin and feed on dead skin cells and sweat.
- Unwashed clothes, such as underwear and socks.

Hand washing

Most infections, especially colds and gastroenteritis, are caught when we put our unwashed hands, which have germs on them, to our mouth. Some infections are caught when other people's dirty hands touch the food we eat. Hands and wrists should be washed with clean soap and water, using a brush if your fingernails are dirty. Dry your hands with something clean, such as paper towels or hot air dryers. You should always wash your hands:

- After using the toilet
- Before making or eating food
- After handling dogs or other animals
- If you have been around someone who is coughing or has a cold.

Personal hygiene for women

The vagina is able to clean itself no special care is needed, other than washing the external genitals. Do not put anything like douches into the vagina, as the delicate skin can be damaged. Here are some personal hygiene suggestions for women:

- **Menstruation** - wash your body, including your genital area, in the same way as you always do. Change tampons and sanitary napkins regularly, at least four to five times a day. Always wash your hands before and after handling a tampon or pad.
- **Cystitis** - is an infection of the bladder. This is a common condition for sexually active young women. Urinating after sexual intercourse can help to flush out any bacteria that may be in the urethra and bladder.
- **Thrush** - some soaps and detergents can irritate the skin of the vagina, and make thrush infections more likely. Some people find that they often get thrush when they use antibiotics. Use mild soap and unperfumed toilet paper. Avoid tight, synthetic underwear. Try cotton underwear, and change regularly. There is medical treatment for thrush, so talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Personal hygiene for men

A build-up of secretions called smegma can form under the foreskin of uncircumcised men. If you are uncircumcised, gently pull back the foreskin when you have a shower and clean with water. You can use soap if you like, but make sure you rinse it off well.

Bad breath

Good dental hygiene includes regular brushing and flossing. Bad breath can be caused by diseases of the teeth, gums and mouth, such as infections. Most people have bad breath first thing in the morning because saliva is not made while you're asleep. Some foods that can cause bad breath include garlic and onion. Mouth washes, mouth sprays and flavoured chewing gum can make your breath smell better for a while, but if you have a health problem in your mouth, you need to see your dentist.

Travelling hygiene

When travelling overseas, take special care if you're not sure whether the water is safe. Suggestions include:

- Drink only bottled water.
- Don't use tap water to clean your teeth.
- When you wash your hands, make sure they are totally dry before you touch any food.
- Don't wash fruit or vegetables in unsafe water.
- If you have no other water source, make sure the water is boiled before you drink it by holding it at a rolling boil for one minute.
- Make sure any dishes, cups or other utensils are totally dry after they are washed.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dentist.

Things to remember

- Good personal hygiene is one of the most effective ways to protect ourselves and others from many illnesses, such as gastroenteritis.
- Wash your hands regularly, especially before preparing or eating food and after going to the toilet.

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Better Health Channel

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