

Handwashing at School

Making the case for handwashing at school

Daily activity between students, staff and school volunteers makes it easy to spread germs and micro-organisms that can cause infection. Sharing books, puzzles, pencils, computers or skipping ropes or touching door handles are just a few of the ways germs can spread. Handwashing, when done correctly, is *the single most effective way* to prevent the spread of infection. Due to lack of time, limited access to handwashing facilities and lack of encouragement or education, some students do not adequately wash their hands on a regular basis. This may place them at risk for illnesses and infections such as colds or the flu which can be easily passed to other students and school community members.

What is appropriate student handwashing at school?



Schools are encouraged to provide handwashing instruction and time for handwashing before eating. Handwashing facilities are in good repair and stocked with supplies (eg, soap, paper towels).

Schools can help to inhibit the spread of infection by encouraging and helping children to wash hands before eating, after handling animals or their waste, after handling garbage, after visiting

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someone who is sick, after playing outdoors, after physical education class, after using the bathroom, after blowing their nose, sneezing or coughing or when hands feel or look dirty.

Benefits of promoting handwashing at school

Promoting frequent student handwashing:

- Reinforces the classroom healthy eating education
- Inhibits the spread of infection
- Reduces the number of children who may miss school because of infections
- Links to the 'whole school approach' to creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment
- Shows parents and the local community that the school takes the health of its students seriously

Success to share

The principal at John McCrae Public School in Markham is determined to ensure his school is promoting handwashing to all students! To kick off their school campaign, he dressed up as 'bubbles of soap' for Halloween.

Submitted by Lucy Valleau, Public Health Nutritionist, York Region Health Services

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An important note about hand sanitizers and schools

Hand sanitizers should be used only if you don't have soap and water available. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are recommended provided they contain more than 60 per cent alcohol. Hand sanitizers should be used only on visibly clean, dry skin and *not* when hands are *visibly dirty*. Apply sanitizer to your hands, enough so that by using a rubbing motion you can effectively cover all surfaces of your hands, including the backs and under your nails. *Be sure to rub until your hands are dry.*

Hand sanitizers are safe for children to use; however, they must be supervised when using it. Note that, after proper application to the hands, the alcohol content evaporates. Be sure hand sanitizers are stored safely away from children.

Tips to encourage student handwashing at school

1. Contact the local public health unit/ department to see what services and/or resources they have to encourage and educate children about handwashing. Some health units/departments will allow health inspectors to come to assemblies and/or classes and provide handwashing demonstrations.
2. Adequate supervision is essential in forming good handwashing habits in children.
3. Ensure that your school has adequate handwashing facilities that are dedicated to handwashing, easily accessible (within reach of younger students), with warm running water, liquid soap in a pump and paper towels in a dispenser.
4. Demonstrate good handwashing technique with the students, post signage on good handwashing technique at all hand sinks (ie, classrooms, washrooms, kitchen facilities, lunchroom, teachers' lounge, etc) and provide constant reminders encouraging school community members to wash their hands.
5. Set a good example and ensure that everyone in the school community (ie, teachers, teachers' assistants, classroom volunteers, lunch monitors, student nutrition program volunteers, canteen operators, 'special food' day servers) are knowledgeable about and practise good handwashing technique.

Good handwashing technique is easy to learn and can reduce the spread of illnesses and infections (eg, Norwalk virus and colds and flu) among both children and adults. Nowadays, children are encouraged to sneeze into the bend in their arm rather than sneeze into their hands to avoid further contamination.

Does your school have a Healthy School Nutrition Environment?

A Healthy School Nutrition Environment exists when a school promotes healthy eating through words *and* actions. Students get the same message about food, nutrition and healthy eating wherever food is served – in the classroom, in the school and at home. The following nine Essential Elements¹ are recommended for a school to have a healthy nutrition environment.

Whole School Approach	Essential Elements
In the School	<p>Does your school offer healthy, reasonably priced and culturally-appropriate food choices? For example does your school have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healthy fundraising? • a school milk program? • a healthy tuck shop? • healthy 'special food' days? • non-food rewards in the classroom? • healthy classroom celebrations? • healthy refreshments at school meetings and events?
	<p>Do parents, teachers and volunteers role model healthy eating and body image behaviours at school?</p>
	<p>Does your school have a Student Nutrition Program (eg, breakfast, snack and lunch)?</p>
	<p>Does your school practise safe food practices and have an allergy-safe environment?</p>
	<p>Are nutrition breaks at school appropriately scheduled?</p>
	<p>Does your school have a food and nutrition policy?</p>
	In the Classroom
<p>Do teachers have up-to-date nutrition resources to support the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum?</p>	
In Homes and In the Community	<p>Does your school provide student, parent and community education about healthy eating?</p>

¹ Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health School Nutrition Workgroup. 2004 *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.

Need more information?

Public health offers *Nutrition Tools for Schools - a toolkit for elementary schools*. Whether you're a teacher, parent, school administrator or volunteer, this toolkit will lead you through a step-by-step process to creating a healthy nutrition environment in your school. *Nutrition Tools for Schools* contains a variety of resources and tools to implement the nine Essential Elements listed above. For more information about this toolkit, please contact your public health unit/department.

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