Preventing the Spread of Infection: Standard Precautions

Standard Precautions
You, your family and friends can do a lot to prevent the spread of infection in hospitals, clinics, and communities. The key to preventing infection is using safety measures known as standard precautions. UW Health care workers use standard precautions with all patients at all times. These safety measures help stop the spread of germs from one person to another.

Germs such as bacteria and viruses are spread in a number of ways. Most germs are spread by contact between people, often by unwashed hands. Some germs are in the air and enter your body when you breathe. Other germs can be found in food or water.

Hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, and wearing protective clothes are common standard precautions used to prevent the spread of germs and infection. Hand hygiene is cleaning hands with soap and water or an alcohol hand rub. Respiratory hygiene is putting a tissue, your hand, or your arm over your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. After sneezing or coughing, hand hygiene is used. Gloves, gowns, masks, and face shields are clothes used to keep germs off and out of our bodies.

Hand Hygiene
The best way to stop the spread of germs is to clean our hands often. When you wash your hands with soap and water, the rubbing of your hands loosens many of the germs and the water rinses them away. When you use an alcohol hand rub, the alcohol kills many of the germs on your hands. Simple hand cleaning can help prevent the flu, colds, and other infections.

Everyone who provides care for you should clean their hands. If you do not see your caregivers clean their hands when entering your room, please ask them to do so. It only takes a few words like these to help support this healthy habit:
• “Excuse me; did you clean your hands?”
• “I saw that you cleaned your hands, thank you!”

It is also important for family members and visitors to wash their hands when they visit you. They should wash their hands when they enter your room and when they leave your room. Keep in mind that objects such as doorknobs, keyboards, elevator buttons, and phones may carry germs that can make us sick. Since it is hard to avoid these objects, it is vital to clean our hands often. If you must stay in bed, please ask your caregiver for soap and water or alcohol hand rub to clean your hands.

How to Wash Your Hands the Right Way
• Wet your hands with water. Then put soap on your hands.
• Rub your hands together for at least 15 seconds. You may say the ABCs to make sure you’ve washed long enough. Clean all parts of your hands, fingers, thumbs, nails, and wrists.
• Rinse your hands well to remove soap. Dry your hands gently with soft paper towels or a dry cloth towel. Use a towel or your elbow to turn off the faucet.
When to Wash Your Hands
With Soap and Water
- When your hands are dirty
- Before you fix or eat food
- Before and after treating a cut or wound
- Before putting in or taking out contact lenses
- After touching raw meats like chicken or beef
- After using the restroom
- After contact with blood, urine, stool, vomit
- After changing baby or adult diapers
- After touching animals and pets
- After touching garbage

How to Use Alcohol Hand Rubs
- Put the alcohol hand rub in the palm of one hand.
- Rub your hands together. Clean all parts of your hands, fingers, thumbs, nails, and wrists.
- Rub your hands until they are dry. You know you’ve used enough of the hand rub if it takes 25-30 seconds to dry on your hands.

When to Use Alcohol Hand Rubs
- Anytime you are cleaning your hands when they don’t look dirty
- Before and after you have contact with someone who is sick
- After shaking or holding hands
- After coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose

Respiratory Hygiene
Many diseases are spread by coughing and sneezing. When you cough or sneeze, germs can travel three feet or more. Using a tissue or your hand or arm to cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing can help stop the spread of the flu, colds, and other infections.
- Use a clean tissue to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Throw used tissues away and clean your hands right after you are done.
- If you don’t have a tissue, cover your mouth and nose with the bend of your elbow or hands. If you use your hands, clean them right away.
- Try not to touch your eyes, nose, and mouth. Even when your hands appear to be clean, germs are often spread this way.

Avoid Close Contact
When you have an infection, try to stay at least three feet away from other people. If you can, wear a mask over your nose and mouth if you are coughing. Don’t shake hands or touch others. Do not visit patients in the hospital. Try to stay away from people who could get sick easily (e.g., babies, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with chronic health problems).