

“Bless you!” “Gesundheit!” “Salute!” “Santé!”

They’re all words we say when someone sneezes. But beyond thinking about the words, are we thinking about germs, especially when someone sneezes or coughs?

Cold months usually bring with them a higher number of people experiencing upper respiratory illness, especially colds and the flu. With more people sick and spreading their germs, protecting yourself from some of these bugs is increasingly important – and surprisingly simple.

Use frequent, thorough handwashing and cover your cough or sneeze.

With all the talk of the flu, especially around the holidays, it is comforting to know that something so simple can help keep you and your loved ones safe. It’s free, it’s easy and it gives you more time to spend with friends and family instead of more time spent sick in bed.

In fact, it can help fight more than just the flu. Viruses and bacteria can survive on your hands and surfaces for hours. Washing your hands regularly is a proven way to decrease your chances of getting sick.

Handwashing should always be performed:

- Before, during, and after preparing food
- Before eating food
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick
- Before and after treating a cut or wound
- After using the toilet, changing diapers or disposable undergarments, or cleaning up someone who has used the toilet
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After touching an animal, animal feed, or animal waste
- After touching garbage

It turns out that, although we’d like to think that we all regularly wash our hands, a lot of people don’t. According to the American Society for Microbiology, 91 percent of adults say they always wash their hands after using a public bathroom, but only 83 percent were observed actually doing it. Only one in three people said they wash their hands after coughing or sneezing.

Here are a few tips to protect yourself and others:

- Use warm water and wash with soap for at least 20 seconds (sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice).
- Use your towel to turn off the faucet and open the door (whenever possible).
- Don’t have soap and water? An alcohol-based gel that contains at least 60% alcohol will do in a pinch.

Handwashing after using the toilet, changing diapers or disposable undergarments, or cleaning up someone who has used the toilet is especially important because feces is a major source of germs. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a single gram of human feces, which weighs the same as a paper clip, can contain one trillion germs.

For people who may already be sick, covering coughs and sneezes can make a big difference in keeping everyone around them healthy. According to the CDC, people who are sick should also:

- Avoid close contact with people and stay at home.
- Wash hands often.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at home, work or school.

For more information on preventing holiday-time illness, go to flu.org and <http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/>, or log on to the Catawba County Public Health web site at <http://www.catawbacountync.gov/phealth/hottopics.asp> for information on winter illnesses and how to prevent them.