



World Health Organization
Regional Office for Africa
Division of Healthy Environments and Sustainable Development
Food Safety Unit (FOS)



Fact Sheet 2°

FAST FACTS

- ? Many foodborne diseases and pathogenic microorganisms are spread by contaminated hands.
- ? Foodborne pathogens, such as *salmonellosis*, *shigellosis*, *hepatitis A*, *giardiasis* and *campylobacteriosis* are transmitted via the faecal-oral route. These account for a substantial number of disease outbreaks in developing countries.
- ? Good quality drinking-water and good personal hygiene in food preparation and handling are therefore of utmost importance in preventing the spread of these diseases.¹

Hand Washing and food safety

A bulk of the foodborne disease outbreaks are attributable to poor hygienic practices and improper handling of food. Undoubtedly, adequate personal hygiene practices are essential in reducing the risks of a foodborne illness. Hand washing is one of the most effective and cheapest measures against infections and foodborne disease

Foodborne disease

Many foodborne diseases and pathogenic microorganisms are spread by contaminated hands. Many of these illnesses occur unnecessarily, since the faecal-oral routes of disease transmission are easily prevented¹.

WHO reports that 90% of the annual deaths from diarrhoea are among children particularly in developing countries. A significant number of the deaths could be attributed to shigella, which causes dysentery or bloody diarrhoea².

A study on the microbial quality of street foods in Accra, Ghana showed among others the significance of proper hand-washing practices, use of soap and environmental hygiene. Among

the reported risk factors for street food contamination were cooking of food well in advance of consumption, exposure of food to flies, and working with food at ground level and by *hand*.³

Significance of proper handwashing to food safety

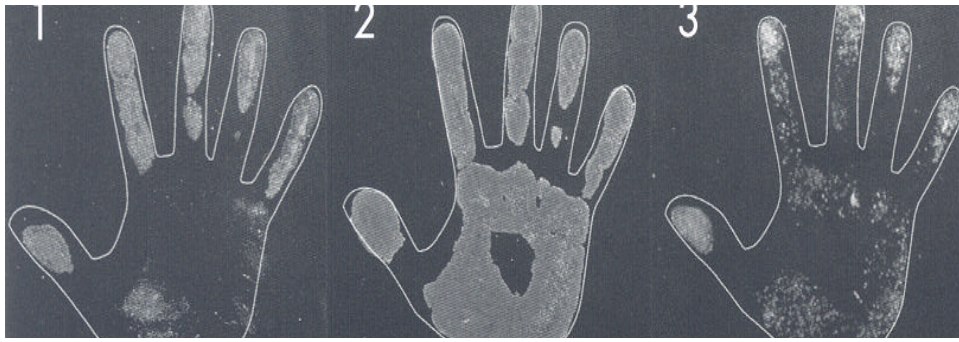
Judicious washing of hands can significantly reduce bacterial contamination and risk of foodborne illness.

Reports indicate that the simple act of washing hands with soap and water reduces incidents of diarrhoea from *shigella* and other causes by up to 35 percent.²

¹ Healthy Villages – A Guide for Communities and Community Health Workers. World Health Organization. 2003

² Water for Health: Taking Charge. WHO. 2001

³ Mensah *et al.* Street Foods in Accra, Ghana: How Safe Are They? Bulletin of the World Health Organization. 2002.



1. Hands after handling Raw chicken

2. Hands after handling a dirty dishcloth

3. Hands after using the toilet

Source: FDF/PHILS, UK

Proper hand washing

Hands should ideally be washed, with soap, under running water. Rubbing hands vigorously 15-20 seconds until a soapy lather appears, and scrubbing between fingers and fingernails.

Where there is no water system, running water can be organized by using a water butt with a tap. If there is a shortage of water, using soap with a small quantity of water in a bowl is adequate.³

Washing of hands should particularly be done:

- ✍ before food preparation;
- ✍ before eating;
- ✍ before serving food;
- ✍ during food preparation to avoid cross-contamination;
- ✍ before and after handling raw meat, poultry and fish products;
- ✍ after changing diapers;
- ✍ after blowing nose/sneezing;
- ✍ after using the toilet, not just after defecation, since the pathogens can also be picked up from previous users of toilets via door handles, taps and drying towels.⁴
- ✍ after handling unsanitary objects such as waste/garbage containers;
- ✍ after contact with toxic substances or chemicals;
- ✍ after touching/handling livestock or pets;

³ Food, Environment and Health: A Guide for Primary School Teachers. World Health Organization. 1990

⁴ Basic Food Safety for Health Workers. Adams M and Mortarjemi Y. WHO. Geneva. 1999.

In all these activities hands may become contaminated with pathogens or toxic chemical residues that can be transferred to food.⁴

Health education in food safety

Experience has shown that well designed and implemented educational programmes, is a feasible and cost-effective means of improving health status.⁵

Adequate food safety and hygiene education/promotion particularly in schools with the provision of adequate sanitary and hand-washing facilities are essential.

WHO technical support and actions in food safety education

A special focus is being made at collaborating with education authorities to promote food safety education in primary and secondary level, among both students and parents. Work is also underway on the promotion of participatory community-based food safety education and awareness-raising strategies.

For More Information on Food Safety, please contact Division of Healthy Environments and Sustainable Development (DES). B.P. 6 Congo Brazzaville. Telephone (47 241 39229) or Fax (47 241 39512)

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⁵ Foodborne disease: a focus for health education. WHO. 2000

