

Clean and Simple Germ Defense

Wash your hands of unnecessary and potentially harmful antibacterial soaps. BY JENNIFER MEDLEY

PROTECTING THE FAMILY FROM icky germs is a top priority in your household, but antibacterial soaps may not be the most healthy or planet-friendly solution. In fact, recent studies indicate that they may do more harm than good. According to the Centers for Disease Control, plain soap and water is the best way to fight everyday germs.

THE DIRT ON ANTIBACTERIAL SOAPS

Antibacterial soaps contain a number of chemicals, including triclosan, a pesticide. The Environmental Working Group has declared triclosan toxic, saying it pollutes both the human body and the environment. The chemical has been found in mothers' breast milk and it may be detrimental to fetal and childhood development. As for our ecosystem, the Environmental Protection Agency has reported that triclosan seeps into waterways and can damage marine plants.

Not only does triclosan present potential risks to humans and the planet, but products containing it may not actually kill all the bacteria on your family's hands. If these tough bacteria then reproduce, the mutated strains might be resistant to certain antibiotics, meaning a bacterial infection may be harder to wipe out with antibiotics.

The final reason to forego antibacterial soaps is also the most practical: oftentimes, they are not as effective as they claim. Dr. Allison Aiello, of the University of Michigan School of Public Health, is part of a team that recently studied antibacterial soaps. "We found that when the [antibacterial] products were used at the concentration that's available for consumers, there was no significant reduction in bacteria above and beyond plain soap," she says.

GUIDELINES FOR WASHING UP

Most germ exposure begins with the hands, so consistent hand washing is the best prevention against illness. Getting your family into the habit of soaping up can mean fewer trips to the doctor and fewer missed days at school.

Did You Know?

Only 67% of Americans clean their hands with anything (even just water) after visiting the bathroom.

To get your kids washing properly, follow some handy hand-washing tips: Wash with warm water and regular soap, making sure to rub hands together for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Have your children sing "Happy Birthday" two times in a row. After washing, dry hands with a towel or air dryer, and (whenever possible) use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and open the door in public restrooms.

The most important rule is remembering to wash. Kids and adults should clean their hands regularly throughout the day, especially before cooking and eating. Adults should also wash after changing diapers, before feeding children, before or after treating a cut or wound, and after tending to a sick child.

SOAP-AND-WATER ALTERNATIVES

How can you fight germs when you're on the go? "If you don't have a sink around, consider using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer," says Dr. Aiello. Try the **EO Hand Sanitizing Spray** (\$5, eo-products.com). For an alcohol-free alternative, try the **CleanWell All-Natural Hand Sanitizer** (\$3, drugstore.com), which harnesses the germ-killing power of essential plant oils.

