



# VETERINARY SURGEONS BOARD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

## SA Health Hand Hygiene – Questions and Answers

### **Why is it important to decontaminate my hands between patients?**

In the health care setting there are many opportunities for the transmission of harmful micro-organisms between patients and staff. Hand hygiene is one of the most important ways of preventing infection, and thereby protecting both you and your patients. Hand hygiene is the responsibility of everyone working in health care.

### **Does hand hygiene really work?**

Yes absolutely! There is ample research to show that health care workers who decontaminate their hands greatly reduce the risk of transmitting harmful micro-organisms to their patients.

### **Don't all health care workers know about hand hygiene?**

Well they should, but studies have shown that health care workers still do not perform hand hygiene as often as they should. The reasons given for this include things like skin irritation, lack of access to sinks, insufficient time, high workload and understaffing.

### **What should I use to clean my hands?**

In the healthcare setting, it is recommended that:

- An alcohol-based hand rub is used to decontaminate your hands between patient contacts, unless your hands are visibly soiled (i.e. contaminated with blood or body fluids), or in clinical situations where alcohol is less effective (i.e. caring for patients with *Clostridium difficile*). These rubs are very effective, quick and easy to use.
- Soap and water should be used after going to the toilet and if your hands are visibly soiled. If soap and water are not available (i.e. if you are working out in the community) you could clean your hands with a disposable detergent-based wipe.



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## Will alcohol-based hand rubs irritate my hands?

No, if used correctly, most alcohol-based hand rubs are less irritating to hands than soap and water. They contain emollients and other ingredients that protect the skin. You should report any skin irritation on your hands to your manager.

## Why do I need to decontaminate my hands when I have been wearing gloves?

Gloves are not a substitute for hand hygiene. Even though gloves offer hands useful protection, microscopic holes in the glove material can occur which allow micro-organisms to pass through. In addition, hands can sweat under the gloves which provides a warm, moist environment for micro-organisms to multiply.

## Should I be using antimicrobial soap to wash my hands?

Antimicrobial soaps are not recommended for routine hand hygiene in the health care setting. There are some instances, however, where they may be recommended (i.e. in the care of patients with multi-resistant organisms, or prior to specific procedures); you should follow your facility's protocols with regards to these.

## When should I decontaminate my hands?

- *During* Patient Care activities
- *Before and after* patient contact
- *Before and after* performing invasive procedures or doing dressings
- *Before* moving to different body sites on the same patient
- *After* removing gloves and other PPE
- *During* other activities
- *Before and after* preparing, handling, serving or eating food
- *After* going to the toilet
- *After* changing a nappy
- *After* blowing your nose, or covering your cough or sneeze
- *After* discarding waste
- *After* smoking

## How should I decontaminate my hands?

- with an alcohol-based hand rub:
  - ensure hands are visibly clean
  - apply 1-2 pumps of product onto one palm
  - spread product over all surfaces of hands and wrists with a 'rub and roll' action, covering the palms, finger tips, between fingers, backs of hands, and base of thumbs



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- rub hands together until product has completely evaporated and hands are dry (15-20 sec)
- with soap and water:
  - wet hands with warm (not hot) running water
  - apply soap and lather all surfaces of the hands and wrists, including palms, backs of hands, fingers and base of thumbs, between fingers and under the fingernails
  - rub hands together for at least 10-15 seconds (about the time it takes to sing a chorus of “Happy Birthday”). It’s important to wash your hands thoroughly, just giving them a quick rinse is not enough rinse hands well under running water
  - dry hands thoroughly by blotting with a disposable paper towel. If hands-free taps are not available, you can use the paper towel to turn off the tap to prevent re-contaminating your hands

## **Why can’t I wear my jewellery?**

Items of jewellery like bracelets and rings interfere with the hand decontamination process and can harbour micro-organisms. They also can be a risk to patients’ skin and may tear gloves. If plain-band rings are permitted, care must be taken to clean around and under the ring.

## **What’s wrong with artificial nails?**

Artificial nails and nail enhancements have been implicated in outbreaks of infection and transmission of micro-organisms, and therefore are not acceptable for health care workers who have direct patient contact. Natural nails should be kept short.

## **Is it OK to use hand cream?**

It is important to look after the skin on your hands. Intact skin is our first line of defence from micro-organisms. Applying hand creams regularly can prevent skin dryness and are quite OK to use. The hand cream should be compatible with your facility’s hand hygiene products and disposable gloves.

## **References**

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