



Date: December 5, 2008

General questions: Patrick O'Neill, DHS, 971-673-1282

Technical questions: Eric Pippert, DHS, 971-673-0453

Gov. Ted Kulongoski proclaims Hand Washing Awareness Week

The advice is right up there with eating sensibly, getting plenty of exercise and throwing away your cigarettes -- wash your hands. It's the single biggest step you can take to keep from getting sick and to avoid making other people sick. That's why Dec. 7 through 13 is Hand Washing Awareness Week, as proclaimed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski.

Hand washing has been overlooked and undervalued as a means to prevent the spread of infectious diseases such as colds, flu, intestinal illness and staphylococcus, say experts in the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division.

"It's simple," says Eric Pippert manager of the health division's Foodborne Illness Prevention Program. "You are less likely to get sick -- or make other people sick -- if you wash your hands and wash them well."

Pippert says that proper hand washing requires soap and clean running water.

"You have to make a lather and rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds," Pippert said. If you want to time yourself, 20 seconds is about how long it takes to sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice.

Washing your hands with soap and warm water is important whenever you use the restroom, prepare or eat food, cough, sneeze or blow your nose, pet animals, change diapers, handle garbage, tend someone who is ill or put a dressing on a cut or wound.

Studies show that foodborne diseases, which many times are transmitted by unwashed hands, cause about 76 million illnesses a year in the U.S., with 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.

Even if you don't prepare food, washing your hands can keep disease at bay. A study of school children in Detroit found that those who washed their hands four times a day under teachers' supervision had 24 percent fewer sick days due to respiratory illness and 51 percent fewer lost days because of stomach upset compared to those who were not encouraged to wash.

Pippert says that if you can't wash your hands with soap and water you should use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Apply a dime-sized dollop of sanitizer to the palm of one hand and rub them together, covering all surfaces and your fingers, until dry. It's not a substitute for proper washing with soap and water, he says, but it's better than nothing.

The Governor's proclamation ties in with National Hand Washing Awareness Week, begun in 1999.

###