

[IMAGE]

Give Your Hygiene Habits a Hand

While the origin of the term "the great unwashed" is not entirely clear, it is believed to have been first used to describe the working-class people of France in the period leading up to the French Revolution. The results of a survey sponsored by the American Society of Microbiology suggest that a surprising number of Americans can also be considered among the "great unwashed," and emphasizes the importance of personal hygiene and its impact on health.

In this telephone survey, researchers questioned a nationally representative sample of 1,013 American adults about their hand-hygiene habits after a variety of activities, including using public restrooms, along with hand-washing habits in the home. Among the survey's findings:

- 9 percent of the respondents did not wash their hands after using a public restroom.
- 17 percent did not wash their hands after using the bathroom at home.
- 27 percent did not wash after changing a dirty diaper.
- 58 percent did not wash after petting a dog or cat.
- 68 percent did not wash after coughing or sneezing.

The survey's authors were especially concerned about the low number of people who washed their hands after sneezing or coughing, which could increase the spread of cold and influenza viruses. "We unconsciously touch our mouths, noses, and eyes many, many times each day," one researcher explained. "These mucous membranes are welcome mats for cold and flu viruses, which are readily transferred from unclean hands."

As the results of this survey suggest, one of the easiest ways you can help prevent the spread of infection is quite literally at your fingertips. A few seconds of water, soap, and rubbing is a quick but extremely effective way of protecting yourself from a wide range of infectious diseases.

Hand Washing Survey Fact Sheet. Part II: Telephone Survey. Published by the American Society of Microbiology, Washington, D.C., Sep. 21, 2005.

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