

Back to School Means Back to Sharing Germs

Some look forward to it. Some dread it. Some may feel a little bit of both. It's back to school time!

As students and staff head back to school, they are returning to more than classrooms, homework and activities. They are also returning to environments where germs can spread quickly. Schools bring large groups of people together in classrooms, cafeterias, buses, hallways and athletic facilities. With students and staff spending hours in close contact with one another, communicable diseases—illnesses that can spread from one person to another— can move through a school and community quickly.

Common illnesses such as colds and influenza can spread when people cough, sneeze or talk, or when they touch contaminated surfaces and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. Some infections can also spread through close personal contact or by sharing items with others. When people gather together in enclosed spaces, it creates more opportunities for germs to spread.

Some simple precautions, however, can help reduce that risk. One of the easiest and most effective ways to help prevent the spread of germs is frequent and proper handwashing. Hands can pick up germs after touching desks, door handles, phones, sports equipment and other commonly used surfaces. To wash hands effectively, a person should use clean, running water and soap, scrub their hands for at least 20 seconds, rinse thoroughly and dry them with a clean towel or air dryer. Soap and water is always the best option, but when that's not available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be used.

Handwashing is especially important before eating, after using the restroom, after coughing or sneezing, and after returning indoors from activities outside. Students should also avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.

Preventing the spread of illness also involves knowing when to stay home. Students and staff who are sick should follow school and public-health guidance about when it is appropriate to return. Coughing and sneezing inside your shirt or into your elbow (never into your hands!) can also help keep germs from spreading to others. Group activities are an important part of school life: sports, band, clubs, assemblies, field trips, and so on. While these activities provide valuable opportunities for students to learn and connect, they can also increase close contact among people.

As the new school year begins, remember that preventing illness does not require complicated measures. Regular handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, avoiding unnecessary contact when sick and following recommended health guidance can all make a difference. For students, one of the simplest steps is also one of the most important: wash your hands! Taking a few extra

seconds to practice good hygiene can help keep germs from making their way through the classroom—and help keep more students healthy and in school.

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