

Dentists must follow strict rules for washing hands

Q: How many times a day do dentists have to wash their hands?

A: The fact that handwashing prevents the spread of infection, believe it or not, was not formally recognized until 1843, when Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes discovered that babies under his care seemed to have much less incidence of childbed fever than what his colleagues were experiencing. All that he could figure was the reason for this phenomenon was that he had a phobia about shaking people's hands and washed his own hands almost neurotically.

Another doctor, Ignaz Semmelweiss in Vienna, noted that when his medical students came directly from performing autopsies to the delivery room, there was a much higher incidence of early infant deaths. He experimented by requiring his students to rinse their hands with a diluted bleach solution; infant mortality rates in his practice dropped to less than 1 percent.

Louis Pasteur, who is most known for

his work in purifying dairy products through pasteurization, was first to lecture publicly about the benefits of handwashing, in 1879.

For many years, even prior to the days of rubber gloves, dentists have been mandated to wash their hands thoroughly with an antibacterial soap before treating a patient and immediately after treating that patient. There is significant evidence that antibacterial soap residue accumulates with frequent washing. Therefore, the benefits of handwashing are amplified throughout the day.

It also is recommended that dentists use cool water for handwashing because hot water opens the pores of the skin, which may cause a breach in the barrier of the skin.

The disadvantage with frequent handwashing, especially during the winter months, is that soap and water also tend to dry out the skin and to cause cracking and peeling.

In 2004, the Centers for Disease

Control modified their recommendations, stating that alcohol-based antimicrobial gels such as Purell are just as effective as soap and water for use between patients. However, the effective amount is five pumps, rubbed in and allowed to air dry.

It also is required that dentists wash their hands with soap and cool water when arriving at the office in the morning, before and after lunch break, and before leaving the office at night. It also is required that dentists wash their hands with soap and water whenever their hands are visibly soiled. Obviously, the use of protective gloves is also mandatory.

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