Secrets of Healthy Americans
Secret #3: Fight Germs
SECRET #3: FIGHT GERMS

It’s often the first thing you do in the morning and the last thing you do at night. As if that isn’t enough, you also do it while you are sleeping, standing, walking, and watching TV. If you are like the average American, you touch your face 3,000 times a day. And each time, you could be risking dreaded hand-to-face sickness, the spread of germs from your hands to your mouth, nose or eyes—the most common way germs invade our bodies and make us sick.

Germs are everywhere. “If you have the right germs in the right place at the right amount,” says microbiologist Charles Gerba, PhD, at the University of Arizona, “you can get sick from anything you touch.”

Bacteria are by far the most numerous organisms on the planet. So let’s face it, you’ll never be rid of all the germs you constantly encounter. But don’t worry too much.

You can fight back—and win—against the two to three colds average Americans get a year, the occasional flu, and far worse illnesses, including pneumonia, coronary disease and stroke. And fighting germs can be as easy as it is effective. Simply, protect your health by following basic health habits—such as washing your hands thoroughly and often, taking showers or baths regularly, and brushing your teeth daily.

Surprisingly, a vast majority of Americans are ignoring a number of those common sense rules of good hygiene. And they are literally paying the price in medical bills. Our nationwide Humana Reader’s Digest Healthy Habits Survey 2012 shows that only about one adult in four (27 percent) qualifies as a Clean American:

• They wash their hands upwards of five to seven times a day
• They shower or bathe at least once a day
• They brush their teeth twice a day or more
• And they floss once a day

At little surprise to health experts, Clean Americans are more often in good health than the average American. In our national telephone Healthy Habits Survey, 85 percent of our Clean Americans described their health as excellent, very good or good.

Clean Americans are more often female (63 percent) than male (37 percent). They are more likely to be college graduates and professionals than Americans overall. And they are more likely to be African-American than Caucasian. A full 39 percent of African-Americans maintain the healthy habits required to be Clean Americans, compared to only 25 percent of Caucasians.

Senior men 65 years or older are the least likely to qualify. Only 12 percent are Clean Americans. On average, for example, around a third of senior men shower or bathe less than three times a week.
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HERE ARE SIMPLE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO FIGHT GERMS, STARTING TODAY.

WASH YOUR HANDS—THE RIGHT WAY

Washing your hands is the easiest and most effective way you can eliminate the maximum amount of germs. A good washing can get rid of 99 percent of bacteria and viruses on your hands—protecting you the next time you reflexively touch your face and invite an invasion of microbes that can touch off everything from a cold, gastrointestinal problems, flu, or far more serious illnesses.

Keep this in mind: A good washing is twice as effective as a hand sanitizer.

Health experts recommend that you wash your hands vigorously at least eight times a day. Our Healthy Habits Survey shows that Americans overall average around six times a day. That’s pretty good. But our Survey also finds that one adult in five (27 percent) washes only four times a day, or even less. In addition, one person in 100 did not wash his hands at all yesterday.

One of the groups that wash the recommended eight times a day are people with children at home. Apparently, while they’re helping to keep their kids’ clean, they’re cleaning themselves.

Washing your hands regularly is one issue. Washing them properly is another.

Even when people get around to washing their hands, studies show they often don’t do it thoroughly. Wash your hands this way every time: Wash with soap and hot running water, and really scrub for a full 20 seconds. How long is 20 seconds? Sing the alphabet song (presumably silently unless you’re shamelessly proud of your voice). Or better yet, before that song gets stuck in your head all day, simply wash your hands twice. When you think you’ve washed your hands thoroughly, wash them again.

ALWAYS CARRY HAND SANITIZERS WITH YOU

Think about it. That’s a lot less cumbersome than trying to carry around a kitchen sink. When there is no sink around—which is often—sanitizers are better than nothing. Look for sanitizers that are 99.5 percent ethanol. Studies have found that those ethanol-based products are more effective than alcohol-based cleaners against noroviruses—the extremely contagious “stomach flu” bug.
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SIT IN THE SHOWER As with hand washing, many people don’t shower or bathe as often or as long as experts recommend. Our Survey shows that only 20 percent of Americans shower or bathe more than the recommended minimum of once a day.

And among seniors, a mere 5 percent shower or bathe more than once a day.

In addition, experts say long showers are more effective at eliminating germs than soaking in a bath. How long is long? Several experts suggest showering for 12 minutes. Seniors especially may find it problematic, if not impossible, to stand in a sometimes slippery shower that long. In that case, take a seat. Bring a basic plastic chair into your shower. Sit down and relax as the running water and a little soap wash the germs down the drain.

DON’T HANDLE THE HANDLE Public toilets are to germs, what subway tunnels are to city rats. It’s where the little devils love to live. Always assume that even the cleanest looking facility is absolutely infested. Despite the precautions people take with toilet seats, the most dangerous object in the room is the door handle you face on your way out. Virtually all of the 30 percent of people who don’t wash their hands after using a public toilet grab the handle as they exit, leaving behind handles teeming with up to 40,000 germs per square inch!

Don’t touch that handle—not directly. After washing, use one of your hand sanitizer towels, or a dry paper towel from the dispenser, as a health shield. Keep it in your hand, and don’t let your skin come in contact with the door handle.

POWER BRUSH Next to washing your hands, basic dental hygiene is one of the best ways to eliminate germs and protect your health. Every morning you wake up with 3,000 different bacteria in your mouth ready to find their way through your gums to your bloodstream and create all sorts of havoc, from inflammation to clogging your arteries and more.
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Dental experts suggest that ideally you should brush your teeth thoroughly after every meal—or at least when you wake up and before you go to bed. Our Healthy Habits Survey shows that, on average, Americans do brush twice a day.

However, studies show that most people only brush for 46 seconds—far short of the full two minutes that experts recommend. Furthermore, few people brush or scrape their tongues to purge the germs lurking there, though cleaning it is a quick way to remove bacteria before they can attack your gums just below the gum line.

If brushing your teeth manually in a slow circular motion for two minutes sounds like drudgery, consider investing in a power oscillating toothbrush. Studies have shown that toothbrushes with bristles that automatically rotate in alternating directions remove 11 percent more plaque (the sticky bacteria-fueled film that forms on teeth) than ordinary brushes, while also lowering the risk of always-dangerous gingivitis.

TOSS IN A FLOSS

Even a power toothbrush doesn’t drive away all the particles hiding between your teeth eager to trigger gum disease. Don’t let that happen. Even a slight case of gum disease, often marked by tender red or bleeding gums, may fuel inflammation that can eventually clog arteries, raise blood sugar, and even contribute to Alzheimer’s Disease.

Still, if you can’t bear the idea of flossing for one minute once a day, despite the risk to your health, consider a power flosser. Studies show they can be effective as well as comparatively effortless.

TURN TO A PRO

If your brushing and flossing ranks you as a Clean American, congratulations. But experts say there’s one more thing you need to do. You should have your teeth cleaned professionally by a dentist or dental hygienist at least once every six months. No matter how diligent you are at home, you can’t get rid of all the months of built-up plaque under the gum line that a dentist’s power tools can flush away in less than an hour. Dental water jets clean your teeth at least three times deeper than brushing and flossing alone.
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Apparently half the country has gotten that message. Our Survey shows that half of Americans (53 percent) have had his teeth cleaned professionally in the past six months.

Once again, however, seniors rank low compared to all Americans. Nearly one senior in five (18 percent) has not had their teeth cleaned professionally in more than two years. Since seniors are prone to cavities, dry mouth from medications and other dental problems, older people who ignore their dental hygiene could be making serious mistakes.

**DRINK THIS, NOT THAT**

Experts suggest that you drink up to eight glasses of water a day for a number of reasons, including this fundamental point: The water washes away bacteria in your mouth.

But not all liquids are helpful. Beverages high in sugar and alcohol can actually damage your teeth and contribute to gum disease.

Sugar and acid are key culprits. When sugar mixes with bacteria in your mouth it forms oral plaque, which in turn can irritate your gums and lead to gum disease. Plus the acid in carbonated beverages erodes tooth enamel, raising your risk of troublesome tooth decay and cavities.

Both regular and artificially sweetened varieties of carbonated beverages contain strong acids. The worst are non-colas, which can contain extra citric acid, and diet sodas, which may deliver a double whammy of citric acid and phosphoric acid.

All in all, **most sodas are nearly as acidic as battery acid!**

In addition, studies have found a correlation between alcoholic drinks and the risk of gum disease. In one study researchers reported that 10 drinks a week increased the risk of gum disease by 10 percent, 20 drinks raised it 20 percent and so on. One explanation is that heavy drinking may reduce the immune system’s ability to fight all manner of infections, including those emanating from even minimal gum disease.
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ANTIBACTERIAL PRODUCTS CAN HELP
But research suggests that they are a mixed bag:

- Studies have shown that washing with antibacterial soap is no more effective than plain old soap and water
- Antibacterial sponges aren’t necessarily superior to regular sponges either
- But in a head-to-head comparison, disinfectant and antibacterial sprays and cleaning solutions outperformed homemade baking soda or vinegar alternatives; the store products killed 99.9 percent of bugs, including salmonella, Staphylococcus aureus and Escherichia coli vs. 90 percent for the homemade options

But while antibacterial cleaners are effective against bacteria, most of those products are not designed to kill viruses, and may or may not do so. When researchers studied 292 families, the families using the antibacterial products got as many colds and other upper respiratory infections as those who didn’t use the products. But the study did not rule out the possibility that the products might reduce illnesses caused by bacteria.

DON’T JUST CLEAN YOUR KITCHEN—DISINFECT IT
Cleaning removes dirt. Only sanitizing kills the bacteria living on your countertops, in your sink, and in the most prolific source of germs in your home: your kitchen sponge.

Sponges soak up dirty water and all sorts of germs. Even worse, the germs breed like crazy in the warm, wet crevices and then run wild as you wipe your kitchen counters “cleaning up.”

The simplest thing to do is to ditch the sponge and use paper towels. But if you are a sponge addict, disinfect your kitchen sponge daily. Washing your sponge in your dishwasher, including the entire dying cycle, can kill 99.9 percent of germs. Or, if you’re impatient, you could pop it in your microwave for around a minute—though, be warned, an overheated sponge could catch fire. Zap it, don’t scorch it.
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22 DO’S AND DONT’S TO FIGHT GERMS

1. Do treat bleeding gums as seriously as you would a cut anywhere else on your body.
2. Do drink an 8-ounce glass of water an hour during the day to flush away potentially dangerous bacteria in your mouth.
3. Don’t drink soda and other sugary beverages, including sports drinks, as a general rule.
4. Do sip through a straw when you must have a soda to reduce how much sugar and acid wash over your teeth.
5. Do rinse with an antibacterial mouthwash in the morning to significantly cut your risk of gum disease.
6. Don’t use plastic cutting boards; germs live on the artificial surface rather than sinking below into the natural crevices of old-fashioned wooden cutting boards.
7. Do take precautions disinfecting communal objects, including doorknobs, telephones, and light switches, since viruses can survive for days on such hard surfaces.
8. Do dump the communal cookie jar and candy bowl.
9. Do eat an orange a day to make sure you get the daily recommended 50 milligrams of vitamin C, contained in one orange, to help reduce the risk of gum disease.
10. Don’t ignore persistent dry mouth; the lower production of saliva, which can be related to aging or a side effect of prescriptions, means you are washing away less potentially dangerous bacteria than normal.
11. Do put the contents of all open food boxes in airtight containers.
12. Don’t press too hard brushing your teeth to avoid damaging your gums as well as the softer enamel on the sides of your teeth.
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13. Do replace your toothbrush every month.
14. Do tuck a hand sanitizer in your kid’s or grandkid’s backpack.
15. Do strip a sick bed daily and wash everything, including the comforter and blankets, in 130 degree Fahrenheit water.
16. Don’t go to work or the movies, or anyplace else you can encounter people, when you are sick with the flu or another contagious illness.
17. Do keep dental floss handy, at your desk, in your bag, and even in your car—and use it after eating.
18. Don’t smoke—as if you need another reason to quit—since even the exposure to secondhand smoke can increase the risk of gum disease by up to 70 percent.
19. Do wash all fruit or vegetables before eating them, since germs on the food can survive for hours and viruses can lurk for days.
20. Do store your toothbrush upright to dry faster and also far from your toilet to minimize the spread of germs when you flush.
21. Don’t keep a wet toothbrush in a closed case, as you might when traveling, since wet bristles can be breeding grounds for germs.
22. Do eat at least three servings of such calcium-rich foods as milk, yogurt, sardines or figs to help cut your risk of gum disease by up to 50 percent.
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Look for next month’s installment to Secrets of Healthy Americans on ReadersDigest.com/habits. And read our next Healthy Habits report in the July/August Reader’s Digest.

If you are Medicare eligible, enroll in the Humana Reader’s Digest Healthy Living Plan¹, and get health guidance all year long.

Contact

1-877-283-1313 (TTY: 711) Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Eastern time.

¹These plans are not available in all areas.

The Humana family has health plans with a Medicare contract. Other plans may be available in the service area. Medicare beneficiaries may enroll in the plan only during specific times of the year. Contact Humana for more information.