

Coming Clean: *Hand Sanitizers and Food Safety in Your Home*



The Bottom Line: Frequent and proper hand washing with warm soapy water is the *best* way to clean your hands before preparing food.

Q: What are hand sanitizers?

A: These are products (technically termed “hand antiseptics”) that typically use alcohol or chemicals like triclosan as antimicrobial agents. Usually, alcohol-based products are gels, and triclosan products are foams.

Q: Hand sanitizers are available in many public places, like hospitals. Aren't they safe?

A: They are approved for use in health care settings. Food preparation is a different matter.

Q: Why is food safety a special concern?

A:

1. The types of organisms – termed “pathogens” – that cause food-borne illness tend to be different than those in health-care settings. In the U.S., nearly 70% of the outbreaks in which the carrier is known are caused by Norovirus. Hand antiseptics are less effective against foodborne viruses than bacteria.
2. Hand-to-food contact is common in food preparation so ingredients in hand sanitizers can contaminate food. In retail food settings and other food-service operations where hand antiseptics are used, all ingredients in those products must be approved as indirect food additives or as drugs. No similar legal restrictions cover home settings, but home food preparers who use a hand antiseptic need to be careful they don't contaminate food they are handling.
3. Food preparers frequently have wet hands or substances on their hands that are high in protein. Alcohol-based antiseptics may be less effective on moist hands and on hands contaminated with material high in protein.
4. Antiseptics made with triclosan should be rinsed off with water after applying the product to hands.



Q: What are current recommendations in terms of home food safety?

A:

1. Wash your hands frequently and properly with warm soapy water when preparing food.
2. Minimize hand-to-food contact. For example, when preparing foods that will not be cooked (or cooked further) before being eaten, use a utensil instead of your hands whenever possible.
3. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based gel to clean your hands.

Sources: WFSC team members Suzy Pelican (UW CES) and Dean Finkenbinder (Wyoming Dept. of Agriculture, Consumer Health Services); U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/cleanhands/>; and U.S. Food & Drug Administration, <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~comm/handhyg.html> and www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/handsanitizer092407.html. Downloadable version of this handout available at http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/cesnutrition/WFSC/WFSC_Posters.htm.



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