

## Many Adults Report Not Washing Their Hands When They Should, and More People Claim to Wash Their Hands than Who Actually Do

Dirty, or unwashed, hands are a major source of infections. This is true even in hospitals where, presumably, much more care is taken to scrub and disinfect hands than almost anywhere else. The “WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care (advanced draft),” states that:

- “Failure to comply with hand hygiene is considered the leading cause of healthcare-associated infections.”
- “Each year, at least two million patients in the USA acquire one or more healthcare-associated infections during their stay in hospital.”
- “Every day 247 people die in the USA as a result of a health-associated infection.”

The number of infections passed by unwashed hands is probably much higher outside the hospital setting; infectious diseases, many caused by unclean hands, are the leading causes of death and disease worldwide and the third leading cause of death in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that “hand washing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection.” To reduce the number of contagious infections spread by hand from person to person, experts recommend washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds after using the bathroom, after touching a dog or cat, coughing or sneezing, changing diapers, handling money or before handling food or eating.

A new Harris Interactive survey, conducted for the American Society for Microbiology and the Soap and Detergent Association, shows how many people run the risk of becoming infected, or passing on infections to others because of their failure to wash their hands. Many people admit, when surveyed, to not washing their hands when they should and these claims probably underestimate the problem. When human behavior is *observed*, it shows that some people claim, when interviewed, to wash their hands more often than they actually do.

The evidence on whether things have changed for the better over the last few years is not clear. On the one hand, the observation of people using public restrooms suggests a five percentage point increase on hand washing (from 78% in 2003 to 83% in 2005). However, in four surveys conducted between 1996 and 2005, the proportions of adults who *claim* to always wash their hands have either remained virtually unchanged or have declined slightly.

The 2005 research is based on:

- A nationwide survey of 1,013 US adults surveyed by telephone in August 2005.
- Observation of 6,336 adults in public restrooms in Atlanta, Chicago, New York City and San Francisco observed in August 2005.

The key findings of the research are:

- The 91 percent of adults who *claim* that they *always* wash their hands after using public restrooms is higher than the numbers of people (83%) who were actually observed to do so. It should be noted that people observed washing their hands presumably includes those who always do it and some who do it less often.
- Men are slightly less likely to *claim* that they always wash their hands after using public restrooms than are women (88% vs. 94%). They were also less likely to be *observed* washing their hands (74% vs. 83%).
- Those who *claim* to always wash their hands before or after various other activities vary substantially:
  - After using the bathroom at home (83%)
  - Before handling or eating food (77%)
  - After changing a diaper (73%)
  - After petting a cat or dog (42%)
  - After coughing or sneezing (32%)
  - After handling money (21%)

However, the number of adults who *claim* to always wash their hands in these situations are surely higher than the number who actually do so (based on the differences between claimed and actual hand washing in public restrooms).

- The number of adults *observed* washing their hands in public restrooms rose slightly from 78 percent in 2003 to 83 percent in 2005. Almost all of this increase is explained by an increase in the proportion of women hand washers from 83 to 90 percent. Male hand washing did not change significantly (from 74% in 2003 to 75% in 2005).

For copies of the full report, please go to [www.washup.org](http://www.washup.org).

**TABLE 1**  
**Those Who Claim To Wash Their Hands In Different Situations**

"I am going to read you a list of activities and I'd like you to tell me how often you make it a practice of washing your hands. How often do you wash your hands...?"

Base: All Adults

	%
After petting a dog	
Always	42
Usually	16
Before handling or eating food	
Always	77
Usually	14
After coughing or sneezing	
Always	32
Usually	23
After using a public restroom	
Always	91
Usually	6
After using the bathroom in your home	
Always	83
Usually	10
After changing a diaper	
Always	73
Usually	4
After handling money	
Always	21
Usually	18

NOTE: Responses not included: *sometimes, never, and don't know/refused.*

**TABLE 2**  
**Those Who Claim To Wash Their Hands In Different Situations**

"I am going to read you a list of activities and I'd like you to tell me how often you make it a practice of washing your hands. How often do you wash your hands...?"

*Percent saying "always"*

Base: All Adults

	1996	2000	2003	2005
	%	%	%	%
After petting a dog	48	45	44	42
Before handling or eating food	81	77	80	77
After coughing or sneezing	33	31	31	32
After using a public restroom	94	95	95	91
After using the bathroom in your home	88	86	87	83
After changing a diaper	78	78	75	73
After handling money	22	20	22	21

NOTE: Responses not included: *usually, sometimes, never, and don't know/refused.*

**TABLE 3**  
**Observed And Claimed Hand Washing Behavior**

	All Adults	Men	Women
	%	%	%
Claimed*	91	88	94
Observed	83	74	90

\*Percent who say they "always" wash their hands after using a public restroom.

NOTE: Responses not included: *usually, sometimes, never, and don't know/refused.*

Downloadable PDFs of the Harris Interactive *Healthcare News* are available at [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters\\_healthcare.asp](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_healthcare.asp)

## Methodology

### Telephone Survey

Harris Interactive conducted the telephone survey on behalf of the American Society for Microbiology and The Soap and Detergent Association between August 19 and 22, 2005 among 1,013 US adults aged 18+, of whom 486 were men and 527 were women. Data were weighted to be representative of the entire US adult population by gender, education, ethnicity and region.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the overall results have a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire US adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Sampling error for the men's and women's sub-samples is higher and varies.

### Observational Survey

Harris Interactive conducted an observational study on behalf of the American Society for Microbiology and The Soap and Detergent Association in August 2005 among 6,336 adults, of whom 3,206 were men and 3,310 were women, in public restrooms located at major public attractions in the US and recorded whether or not they washed their hands after using the facilities. The research was conducted in four cities and at six different locations:

- Atlanta – Turner Field
- Chicago – Museum of Science and Industry and Shedd Aquarium
- New York City – Penn Station and Grand Central Station
- San Francisco – Ferry Terminal Farmers Market

Observers discreetly watched and recorded whether or not adults using public restrooms washed their hands. Observers were instructed to groom themselves (comb their hair, put on make-up, etc.) while observing and to rotate bathrooms every hour or so to avoid counting repeat users more than once. Observers were also instructed to wash their hands no more than 10 percent of the time.

The data were not weighted and therefore are only representative of those adults observed.

*These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.*

## About the American Society for Microbiology

The American Society for Microbiology, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is the largest single life science association, with 42,000 members worldwide. The ASM's mission is to gain a better understanding of basic life processes and to promote the application of this knowledge for improved health and economic and environmental well-being.

## About the Soap and Detergent Association

The Soap and Detergent Association ([www.cleaning101.com](http://www.cleaning101.com)) is the Home of the US Cleaning Products Industry<sup>SM</sup>, representing manufacturers of household, industrial, and institutional cleaning products; their ingredients and finished packaging; and oleochemical producers. SDA members produce more than 90 percent of the cleaning products marketed in the US. The SDA is located at 1500 K Street, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005.

## About Harris Interactive

Harris Interactive Inc. ([www.harrisinteractive.com](http://www.harrisinteractive.com)), based in Rochester, New York, is the 13th largest and the fastest-growing market research firm in the world, most widely known for *The Harris Poll*<sup>®</sup> and for its pioneering leadership in the online market research industry. Long recognized by its clients for delivering insights that enable confident business decisions, the Company blends the science of innovative research with the art of strategic consulting to deliver knowledge that leads to measurable and enduring value.

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To become a member of the Harris Poll Online<sup>SM</sup> and be invited to participate in future online surveys, [www.harrispollonline.com](http://www.harrispollonline.com).

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