



# Health Tips for Home Visitors to Prevent the Spread of Illness

**L**enora, a home visitor, arrives at Inez's home to meet with Inez and her son, Javier. Lenora has worked with this family for two months. Javier has just woken up from a morning nap and has dried mucus on his nose and across his cheek. "Javier, do you have a cold?" Lenora asks. He smiles as his nose continues to run. Inez explains that Javier has had a cold for a couple of days and is getting better, but now she feels like she is getting a cold, too. Lenora knows that Inez has been worried about her mother, who lives with them and is not in good health. She asks Inez if anyone has ever talked with her about how to cover a cough or sneeze so

other family members are less likely to get sick. Inez asks her what she means, and Lenora shows Inez a Cover Your Cough brochure in Spanish from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Lenora says that covering your nose with your hands simply spreads the disease. "Your hands touch everything," Lenora explains, "but your upper arm is a safe place for germs." Inez responds, "I always wondered why people do that. We'll definitely try it!"



## Behaviors to Keep You Healthy

As a home visitor, you partner with parents<sup>1</sup> to help them support the healthy growth and development of their children. You develop positive, goal-oriented relationships with parents to promote children's health, safety, and family well-being. While learning about a family's health traditions and practices, you can share some simple ways to help families build healthy behaviors into their daily routines to prevent the spread of illness. You are in a unique position to assess, promote, and model good hygiene.



*School readiness begins with health!*

**Germ:** A small mass or microorganism causing disease, such as a virus or bacteria. A germ is an informal term for something that makes you sick.



**Germ.** (n.d.). In Merriam-Webster's online medical dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/medlineplus/germ>

### What you need to know about germs and young children

There are many germs in the environment. Some are good and help our bodies, and some make us sick. It is normal for young children to get exposed to many germs and suffer frequent mild illnesses throughout the year. Germs are everywhere, and are so small we cannot see them. Children explore the world with their senses, touching and tasting the objects they encounter, easily spreading and picking up germs all day. Offering families some easy ways to reduce their children's exposure to germs can help children stay healthy.

You can use this tool during home visits to accomplish the following:

- Explain simple actions that can minimize the spread of illness in the home.
- Integrate healthy habits into a home visit using
  - **health moments and conversation starters** to help families learn about and build healthy behaviors into their daily routines; and
  - **learning activities** to demonstrate healthy hygiene.
- Discuss the connection between healthy habits and school readiness.

### What you need to know about preventing illness

Technically, germs are viruses, bacteria, fungi, or parasites. We more commonly know them for the illnesses they cause, such as the common cold, strep throat, ringworm, or pinworms.

Although the environment cannot be germ free, there are steps that we can take to keep their numbers at low levels so we can lessen their harmful effects.<sup>2</sup> Maintaining a healthy lifestyle and routinely practicing simple, healthy behaviors that minimize our exposure to germs is the best way to stay healthy.

These healthy behaviors help families to reduce their exposure to germs. They include

- covering a cough or sneeze,
- handwashing, and
- washing surfaces.

### What parents and families need to know about how germs spread in the home

As suggested in the vignette above, families may need some basic health information to understand these healthy behaviors and why they are important. When you engage in each home visit, you can help families understand what to do and why each of these behaviors works.

### Covering Your Cough

Simply covering a cough or using a tissue can minimize the spread of the "spray" from a cough or sneeze. Often teaching the adults in a child's life to perform this simple behavior teaches the child as well.

To help stop the spread of germs:

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Put your used tissue in the wastebasket.



### Soap

**Bar soap** should not sit in water. Germs may grow on bar soap and spread from one person to another.

Ensure no one in the home has a skin infection, and rinse the soap well before and after using it.

**Antibacterial soap** is not recommended.

According to the Food and Drug Administration, there is no evidence that “antibacterial soaps and body washes provide extra health benefits over soap and water.”



- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or elbow, not your hands.
- Wash your hands when done with soap and warm water.<sup>3</sup>

## Handwashing

Washing your hands is an important step to minimizing the spread of germs.<sup>4</sup> Your hands pick up germs from all of the things they touch and then spread them from one place to another. Germs that are on your hands can also enter your body when you eat or when you touch your eyes, nose, mouth, or any area on the body where the skin is broken (because of a cut, rash, etc.).

All you need in order to wash your hands are soap and clean, running water.<sup>5</sup> Handwashing with soap and water removes visible dirt and hidden germs. Studies have demonstrated that handwashing reduced the number of diarrheal illnesses by 31 percent and respiratory illnesses by 21 percent.<sup>6</sup> This means less missed school or work!

According to the CDC, parents can help keep their families healthy by

- teaching everyone good handwashing techniques,
- including handwashing in daily routines,
- reminding children to wash their hands, and
- washing their own hands with their children.<sup>7</sup>

Parents and families should always wash their hands

- **before** eating, feeding, or preparing food. This prevents germs from getting into the mouth from hands;
- **after** touching saliva (after feeding or eating), mucus (wiping a nose, using a tissue), bodily fluids (toileting, diapering), food, or animals; and
- **when visibly dirty**, after touching garbage, or after cleaning.

Families may also ask visitors to wash their hands when they first arrive.

*School readiness begins with health!*

### Hand Sanitizers Are...

- Not for use on children under 24 months.
- Effective when at least 60% alcohol based.
- Poisonous and flammable. Always store them out of reach and sight of children.



Washing with soap and water is always the first choice for handwashing. The CDC recommends the following steps to washing your hands:

1. **“Wet your hands** with clean, running water (warm or cold) and apply soap.”
2. **“Rub your hands** together to make a lather and scrub your hands well; be sure to scrub the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.”
3. **“Continue rubbing** your hands for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Hum the “Happy Birthday” song from beginning to end twice.”
4. **“Rinse your hands** well under running water.”
5. **“Dry your hands** using a clean towel or air dry them.”<sup>8</sup>

Infants and young children will need help with handwashing. *Caring for Our Children* recommends that caregivers:

- Safely cradle an infant in one arm to wash their hands at a sink.
- Provide assistance with handwashing if the infant can stand but not wash their hands independently.
- Offer a stepping stool to young children so they may safely reach the sink.<sup>9</sup>

### Hand Sanitizers

Hand sanitizers have become increasingly popular. If soap and running water are not

available and hands are not visibly dirty, adults can use hand sanitizers if they use and store them correctly.

### What you need to know

Hand sanitizers are not recommended for very young children (under 24 months of age). For children over the age of 2, they may be used with close supervision. Adults should help children use the product correctly to ensure it is not eaten or rubbed into eyes, mouth, or cuts.<sup>10</sup>

### How to use hand sanitizers

According to the CDC, to use hand sanitizers:

- Apply the product to the palm of one hand and use enough to wet all surfaces of both hands.
- Rub your hands together.
- Rub the product over all surfaces of your hands and fingers until your hands are dry.<sup>11</sup>

### Washing Surfaces

Germs spread onto surfaces from hands and objects (tissues or mouthed toys) or from a sneeze or cough. It is important to clean all surfaces well, including toys and any surface that a young child puts in his mouth, because germs cannot be seen and it is easy to overlook surfaces that do not look soiled or dirty.

Toileting and diapering involve germs from bodily fluids and fecal material. These germs spread easily in a bathroom onto hands,



flushers, and faucets. Routinely washing bathroom surfaces removes most germs and prevents them from spreading.<sup>12</sup> The kitchen is another area of the home where it is important to clean surfaces well.

Pay special attention to the surfaces and objects touched by a child or adult who is ill. Cleaning thoroughly can help others in the family stay healthy.

The terms “cleaning,” “sanitizing,” and “disinfecting” deserve close attention. The labels on cleaning products may include these terms, with meanings as follows.

- **Cleaning** removes visible soil, dirt, and germs. Soap and water will clean most surfaces.
- **Sanitizing** reduces, but does not totally get rid of, germs to a level that is unlikely to cause disease.<sup>13</sup> Sanitizers may be appropriate to use on surfaces where you eat (such as a table or high chair tray) and with toys that children place in their mouths.<sup>14</sup> It is important to follow the instructions on the label, which may also include rinsing surfaces after using the sanitizing product.
- **Disinfecting** destroys or inactivates infectious germs on surfaces.<sup>15</sup> Disinfectants may be used on diaper-changing tables, toilets, and counter tops. Be sure to follow the instructions on the product label.

### Integrating Healthy Behaviors into a Home Visit

Healthy behaviors are one way to help children stay healthy so they can focus on learning. A family’s approach to healthy behaviors is influenced by their health beliefs and culture and by their access to health information in a language they can understand.

#### Cleaning Products

- Read and follow label instructions carefully.
- Make sure families know what the labels say if they cannot read them.
- When using on surfaces that are put in the mouth or in contact with food many cleaners recommend rinsing/wiping the area or object with plain water to remove any chemicals.
- Store cleaners out of reach and sight of children. They are toxic.

As a home visitor, you have a unique opportunity to provide health information that you and your families can discuss together. You know the needs and goals of the families you visit and can share easy-to-understand information to help them learn more about healthy behaviors. If there are barriers that prevent parents and families from adding new practices to their daily routines, you can help families think about how to include them in ways that are individualized to meet their needs. Even a few changes in daily routines can help the whole family by reducing illnesses that prevent adults from going to school or work. But, the first step is finding a good time to bring up these topics and knowing what to say.

#### Health Moments

Home visitors will want to use the chart on pages 8 and 9 to identify examples of everyday moments during a home visit to talk about healthy behaviors that can help prevent illness. The chart also provides suggestions of ways to start these conversations with a family, information about germs, and some learning activities in which to engage the family. Engaging families in a playful activity is an easy way to demonstrate healthy behaviors.

### Learning Activities

You can include learning activities in your home visits when you talk about why healthy behaviors are important and how easy they are to do. Try these ideas, which are included in the Health Moments section, to explain how germs are spread.

#### “Germs on the Move” activities

- **Spray bottle sneeze:** Take a spray bottle and fill it with water. Explain that the water represents germs that are spread during a sneeze or cough. Squirt the bottle (away from anyone’s face) to demonstrate how a sneeze spreads germs in the air that land on the table, counters, and floors. Use this activity as an opportunity to talk about why it is important to cover a cough, wash hands, and clean surfaces.
- **Puppet play:** Use a puppet to show a child how to cover a sneeze or cough. Have the puppet say, “This is how I cover my mouth when I have to sneeze or cough.” Ask the child if he or she wants to wipe the puppet’s nose with the tissue you have brought. Tell him that the puppet needs to wash his hands after he wipes or blows his nose. You can invite the parent to practice these behaviors, too, because children learn from watching everything their parents do.
- **Germ handprints:** Use household flour or cornstarch as germs. Sprinkle some flour on a table and have the child or parent touch the “germs”; then watch how the germs spread.
  - Try this in the bathroom. Touch the flusher; then touch the faucet, bathtub, etc.
  - Try this in the kitchen. Sprinkle on the counter, touch it, and then touch the faucet, cabinet handles, etc.



#### Handwashing can be fun

Most children love to play in water. They usually enjoy making bubbles as they mix water and soap, which can make washing hands a fun experience. While teaching healthy habits, parents can sing to young children as they wash their hands or ask them to count their fingers. Older children can sing or rhyme, count, and practice their independent skills.

#### Connecting Healthy Behaviors to School Readiness

Health is woven into all of the five essential domains of birth-to-five school readiness; so when you help families to learn healthy behaviors, you are also promoting children’s school readiness. Social and Emotional Development is one of the five essential domains of school readiness, and Self-Regulation is one of the elements in this domain. The example goal statements from the National Center on Quality Teaching and



Learning (NCQTL) and the Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHSNRC) include Goal 4:

*“Children will begin to learn and internalize (follow) rules, routines, and directions.”*

*“For young infants, this includes recognizing and anticipating daily routines.”*

- “For older infants, this includes anticipating and participating in home ... routines and following rules when directed, such as clearing dishes from the table after meals, walking to the changing table for a diaper change, and brushing teeth after eating.”
- “For toddlers, this includes learning and understanding rules but not always having the self-regulation to follow them.” This can include rules about washing hands or covering a cough.
- For preschool children, “this includes responding to adult requests”; for example, to cover a cough, wash hands before eating and after toileting, or brush teeth after a meal.

Physical Development and Health is another of the essential domains, and Health Knowledge and Practice is one of the elements in this domain. The example goal statements from NCQTL and EHSNRC include Goal 3:

*“Children will identify and practice healthy and safe habits”* (NCQTL), and

*“Children will learn and begin to demonstrate healthy and safe habits”* (EHSNRC).

- “For older infants, this may include anticipating washing hands before and after eating and brushing teeth.”
- “For toddlers, this includes dressing and undressing themselves; brushing their teeth; washing hands independently; getting a tissue for a runny nose; drinking from an open cup; learning to use the toilet; choosing a food to eat when given several nutritious choices; and trying new foods when offered.”
- For preschool children, this includes “washing hands with soap, brushing teeth with toothpaste after a meal ... (and) providing verbal reasons for why these practices are safe and important.”

### **Helping Families Integrate Healthy Habits into Daily Routines**

Look for the health moments during your home visits to identify current practices, barriers, and knowledge gaps; provide information; help families get the supplies they need; and adopt healthy behaviors. This is a way to support family wellness goals that you and parents develop during the family partnership process. These health conversations also reinforce the guidance that families receive from their child’s health care provider. You can also help families connect with their child’s health care provider so that you can all work together to promote their child’s health.

Family members may need your support until the behaviors become a habit—something that everyone does all the time. With your support, parents will be able to make these changes to promote their family’s well-being and their children’s healthy development.

***School readiness begins with health!***

## Health Tips for Home Visitors to Prevent the Spread of Illness

Health Moment	How This Relates to Germs	Healthy Behavior	Conversation Starter/ Learning Activity
Entering the family's home	When we enter someone's house, we bring germs with us.	Washing hands.	<p>When you first arrive, ask the family, "Is it okay if I wash my hands before we start?" This creates an opportunity to demonstrate appropriate handwashing techniques. You can explain that handwashing is important for good health because it helps you to get rid of germs. You can also invite the family to wash hands with you.</p> <p><b>Learning Activity</b></p> <p>Use the "handwashing can be fun" activity to show the family that handwashing can be fun. Or use the "germ handprint" activity to demonstrate how germs spread.</p>
In the kitchen	<p>Germs transfer easily from cooking surfaces to our hands, or from our hands to the food we are cooking.</p> <p>Some foods, such as raw meats and some fruits and vegetables that we buy in the grocery store, contain germs that can make people sick, especially infants, children, and pregnant women.</p>	<p>Washing hands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before cooking</li> <li>• In between preparing meats and vegetables</li> </ul> <p>Cleaning surfaces where adults prepare food.</p> <p>Preparing meats and other foods separately to avoid mixing bacteria from raw meat with foods that will not be cooked.</p> <p>Washing surfaces after handling raw meat.</p> <p>Washing all counters, dishes, and utensils that come into contact with raw meat.</p> <p>Washing fruits and vegetables.</p> <p>Avoiding the habit of tasting food more than once with the same utensil; this act transfers germs from our mouths back to the food, and someone else can pick them up.</p>	<p>When a parent starts to fix a bottle or get a drink or snack for her child, say, "I know you want to make sure your child is healthy, and handwashing is something you can do—and teach your child to do—that really works. Would it be okay to talk about this now?"</p> <p>Or say, "I have some information that I like to share with families about washing fruits and vegetables. Would you be interested?"</p> <p>Or say, "I've found that many people don't know that raw meat can leave germs on the counter while it's being prepared. I'd like to tell you about some simple steps to follow when cooking or handling raw meat. Is now a good time to talk about this?"</p> <p><b>Note:</b> You know the language and literacy level of your families. Ask them about the cleaning materials they use, and help them understand the instructions on the bottle if they are not able to read the labels. You can also talk about why, when cleaning materials are used on a surface, it is important to rinse the surfaces after using these products.</p>
When eating or while a parent is feeding her child	Germs can spread from our hands to our mouths when we eat and to a child's mouth, bottle nipple, or eating utensils.	<p>Washing hands before eating to reduce the spread of germs from our hands to the food we eat or to the children in our household.</p> <p>Washing the high-chair tray or table that food will touch.</p> <p>Not sharing eating utensils or other items that have been in someone else's mouth.</p>	<p>If a parent is feeding her child or you are discussing nutrition issues, say, "I know you want to make sure your child is healthy, and handwashing is something you can do—and teach your child to do—that really works. Would it be okay to talk about this now?"</p> <p>Or say, "We talked about why it is important for you and your child to wash your hands and make handwashing part of your daily routine. I wondered how this is working for you."</p> <p>And, if you have not discussed handwashing before but observe the adult practicing this behavior, say, "I see that you are washing your hands. You are doing something really important to keep your child healthy! Did you know . . . [provide appropriate information about handwashing]."</p> <p><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>



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Health Moment	How This Relates to Germs	Healthy Behavior	Conversation Starter/ Learning Activity
			<p><i>(continued from previous page)</i></p> <p>Or, if you have already discussed this topic, say, "I see that you are washing your hands—you really heard what we talked about!"</p> <p><b>Learning Activity</b></p> <p>Bring some play food on the home visit and have a pretend meal with a toddler or preschool child and his parent. Then talk about how handwashing before eating helps to keep our bodies healthy.</p>
<p>In the bathroom or after diapering or toileting</p>	<p>Germs can spread from fecal material (stool) and make children and adults sick.</p>	<p>Washing hands.</p> <p>Not changing diapers on any surface that is used to prepare food.</p> <p>Washing surfaces used for diapering after changing a child's diaper.</p> <p>Washing hands well and washing the changing table/area to get rid of germs after changing a diaper or toileting a child.</p> <p>Helping children (or reminding children who are old enough) to wash their hands each time they use the toilet.</p>	<p>If a parent changes her baby's diaper or toilets her child during the home visit, say, "I know you do everything you can to keep your child healthy. I'd like to share some health tips with you that you can use each time you change a diaper (or toilet your child). Is this okay to talk about now?"</p> <p>Or say, "I know your child really likes to do things by himself, and you have done a wonderful job of helping him to be independent. Now that he is using the toilet by himself, I wonder if it would be helpful to talk about how to help him remember to wash his hands every time he uses the toilet?"</p> <p>Or say, "I noticed you washed your hands when you were done. That helps make sure any germs from your baby's diaper do not spread into other places in your home like the kitchen or your child's toys."</p> <p><b>Learning Activity</b></p> <p>Use the "germ handprint" activity to demonstrate how germs spread.</p>
<p>If a child or parent is ill or after sneezing or coughing</p>	<p>Germs spread from a sneeze or cough.</p> <p>When children or adults are first getting sick, there are usually more germs.</p>	<p>Covering a sneeze or cough to prevent germs from spreading.</p> <p>Washing hands with soap and water; or using a hand sanitizer, but only with adults and children 2 years of age or older and only if soap and water are not available.</p> <p>Paying extra attention to handwashing and cleaning when a parent is ill, especially when preparing food.</p>	<p>When a parent or child is ill, say, "I see that you (or your child) are ill today. It is even more important to pay special attention to germs when somebody is sick. I'd like to talk about some things that you may want to do to keep everyone else healthy. Is this all right?"</p> <p><b>Learning Activity</b></p> <p>Use the "puppet play" activity to show children how to cover a sneeze or cough. Or use the "spray bottle sneeze" activity to demonstrate how germs spray into the air and land on nearby surfaces.</p>

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### Annotated Resources

#### General

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\* This resource is available in many languages.

\*\* These resources include videos, posters, and podcasts.

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