

## Handwashing for Food Safety

Inadequate handwashing has been identified as a contributing factor to foodborne illness, especially when preparing raw meat and poultry. Hands can move germs that can cause illness found in raw meat and poultry, around the area you are preparing food, which can lead to foodborne illness. Washing our hands often is one of the best ways to stop the spread of harmful germs that can cause illness, including foodborne illness.

### How Should You Wash Your Hands?

Control the transfer of bacteria in your kitchen by [knowing when and how to wash your hands](#) and following these five steps:

1. **Wet** your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), turn off the tap and apply soap.
2. **Lather** your hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Be sure to lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers and under your nails.
3. **Scrub** 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 clean, running water.
5. **Dry** your hands using a clean towel.

### When Should You Wash Your Hands?

Here are crucial moments when you should remember to wash your hands:

- Before, during and after you prepare a meal
  - Especially after handling raw meat, poultry, seafood or eggs or their juices
- Before eating
- After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
- After using the bathroom
- Before and after caring for someone at home who is sick with vomiting or diarrhea
- Before and after treating a cut or wound
- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet
- After touching an animal, animal feed, or animal waste
- After handling pet food or pet treats
- After touching garbage

### Observational Study Results: Handwashing

Recent USDA research conducted in test kitchens revealed some startling insights about how bacteria may be spread around the kitchen when individuals are preparing meat and poultry products. Researchers observed more than 1,000 people to understand their food handling behaviors before, during and after meal preparation.

In the first year of research, USDA observed the kitchen behaviors of people preparing turkey burgers and a side salad in a test kitchen. In the second year of the research, USDA observed the kitchen behaviors of people who self-reported washing poultry; these individuals were asked to prepare chicken thighs and a side salad. In the third year of research, USDA observed the kitchen behaviors of consumers preparing Not-Ready-To-Eat (NRTE) frozen stuffed chicken breasts and frozen corn products.

- During all three years of the observational study, **participants did not even attempt to wash their hands, or did not wash their hands sufficiently, about 95 percent of the time before and during meal preparation.** The most common reason for unsuccessful handwashing when it was attempted was not scrubbing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- During the first two years of the observational study, **participants did not wash their hands sufficiently 99% of the time before and during meal preparation.** The most common reason for unsuccessful handwashing was not scrubbing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- During the first two years of the observational study, researchers identified thousands of opportunities in which participants should have washed their hands to prevent the transfer of bacteria. **Across both studies, participants did not even attempt to wash their hands between 70 and 75% of the time when it was required.**
- **When they did attempt handwashing, many participants did not scrub their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Other errors included not wetting their hands with water before applying soap and not drying their hands with a clean or one-use towel, which are crucial steps.**
- Inadequate handwashing has been identified as a contributing factor to foodborne illness, especially when preparing raw meat and poultry. Hands can move potential pathogens found in raw meat and poultry around the area you are preparing food, which can lead to foodborne illnesses.