Keep washing your hands!

The pandemic has made us quite aware of the importance of washing our hands to help protect against COVID-19 infection. However, as we enter the season of get-togethers and crowded activities, handwashing is also a must to protect against other germs that can make us sick. Here’s what you should know:

**Handwashing is most important** when preparing food, before eating, after using the bathroom, and after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose. (Remember to cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue or the inside of your elbow. Always discard used tissues in the trash.)

To wash hands properly, wet your hands with clean, running water, turn off the tap, and apply soap. Rub your hands together, lathering the backs, between your fingers, and under your nails. Scrub for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol.

**Keeping hands clean can reduce...**

- Respiratory illnesses, like colds or flu, in the general population by about 16–21%
- The number of people who get sick with diarrhea by about 23–40%
- Absenteeism due to gastrointestinal illness in school children by 29–57%
- Diarrheal illness in people with weakened immune systems by about 58%

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**The COVID-19 vaccine.** Information is continuously being updated as we learn more about the virus and how best to prevent its spread. Everyone age 5 and up is eligible to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Always check with your healthcare provider and the CDC for up-to-date recommendations including those for children and teens. Visit: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html

**COVID-19 booster shots.** COVID vaccines work well, but boosters may be needed to protect against the Delta variant. You can mix and match which vaccine you get as a booster. For eligibility and the time period to get a booster according to what COVID vaccine you got initially, visit: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/booster-shot.html

**Mask recommendations.** The CDC recommends that everyone 2 years of age or older who is not fully vaccinated should wear a mask in indoor public places. Consider wearing a mask outdoors in areas with high numbers of COVID-19 cases or for activities with close contact with others who are not fully vaccinated. To find transmission levels and masking guidance by county, visit: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html

**Travel:** For general domestic and international travel guidance including getting tested, visit: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html
Spend time with others—it’s good for you!

As we continue to forge ahead toward a more connected future, we encourage you to make the most of the rest of 2021 as you plan to spend time with others around the holidays. While most holiday celebrations center on meals, the true meaning and intention behind them is togetherness. This holiday season, indulge in conversation and spend quality time with your friends and family. Try these tips.

First, and foremost, follow guidelines for social gatherings. If you’re in an area of high transmission, the CDC recommends wearing a mask in public settings, even if you are fully vaccinated. If you’re fully vaccinated and planning to celebrate with friends/family that are fully vaccinated at someone’s home, masks are only suggested for those who are at high-risk such as immunocompromised individuals, or for those who are not vaccinated.

Make time to talk to everyone and engage in conversation. Talk to your grandma about her yummy recipes or ask your uncle about his favorite music. Show you are listening by asking open-ended questions, provide thoughtful responses, and make strong eye contact.

Share favorite memories from previous holidays. Talking about years past is a great way to bond with family and friends.

If you’re hosting, ask your guests to bring a photo album to share. It can help stimulate happy memories and encourage people to catch up with one another.

Try to anticipate and plan for different viewpoints and plan how you will respond in a respectful way. Remember, not everyone has the same opinion as you, and gatherings (especially during the pandemic) can highlight our differences.

If the ongoing pandemic has you feeling apprehensive or unable to spend time indoors with groups of people you can still connect with others. Here are some suggestions:

- **Ask to be virtually included in celebrations** or plan to video call your friends/family when you know they are together to say a quick hello.
- **Spend quality time with someone you appreciate** (and feel safe to be around). Plan an activity to do together just for the fun of it.
- **Participate in a shared activity** such as a virtual baking contest or holiday decoration competition.

Let’s be thankful and appreciative for all of the special people in our lives, and acknowledge the significance of all that we’ve been through. We’re optimistic for an even better 2022!
Reset your mind to positivity

Let’s face it, the pandemic and life’s worrisome events have made it a challenge to remain positive. But as the new year arrives, it’s possible to start fresh, making a decision to focus on appreciating the roses in your life rather than thinking of the thorns. This doesn’t mean pretending to be happy when you’re not. If you’re upset, it’s important to deal with and talk about your feelings. By choosing to fill your mind with positive thoughts you’ll create a more calm, hopeful attitude, feel better about yourself and others, and feel more competent to handle everyday challenges.

Here’s how to start thinking more positively:

- **Reason with facts, not feelings.** Changes in your life can make you feel uncertain and anxious, making you fear the worst. If you’ve experienced a setback, slow down, get the facts, and review your options. Then ask yourself, “If this was happening to somebody else, what advice would I give them?”

- **Stay connected.** Keep in touch with friends and loved ones and be open to developing new friendships. Volunteering your time and keeping active in clubs or groups will help you focus on others more than on yourself. Spend time with positive people who are living active, fulfilled lives.

- **Schedule time for pleasurable activities.** This can boost your spirits and give you something to look forward to.

- **Become a problem-solver.** Instead of wishing problems would go away, take steps to solve them as quickly as possible, asking for support and help from others if needed.

- **Find the silver lining.** Give yourself time to adjust to change or loss. Change can bring new opportunities: Be open to them, realizing that while your life may not be the same, it can be better than what you imagine.

- **Question your deeply held beliefs.** Screen out the negatives. For example, if you have a recurring dread of aging triggered when you misplace something, don’t dismiss it as “just old age,” or a faded memory. The real reason for what you are experiencing could be only temporary — such as tiredness, hunger, or having a lot on your mind.

For more help, talk to Health Advocate, your health practitioner or a licensed counselor.

Safe Toys and Gifts Month

To ensure that toys do not pose hazards for choking, lead poisoning, suffocating, falling or another danger, be aware of safety guidelines and choosing age-appropriate toys. Be alert to the toys with magnets, sharp edges, small parts, toxic paint, cellophane/plastic wrapping and other components.

Visit: [https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/How-to-Buy-Safe-Toys.aspx](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/How-to-Buy-Safe-Toys.aspx)