

**SPREAD LOVE
NOT GERMS**

2025 NFID STATE OF HANDWASHING REPORT

**The Dirt on How, Why, and When
People Wash Their Hands**

**WET
LATHER
SCRUB
RINSE
DRY**



National
Foundation for
Infectious
Diseases

**HANDS IN FOR
HANDWASHING**

MANY ADULTS KNOW HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO WASH THEIR HANDS, AND YET IT IS EASY TO FORGET IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) commissioned a national survey to learn more about handwashing knowledge and behavior among US adults. Overall findings show that adults primarily wash their hands to stay healthy and that they are most likely to wash their hands after using the bathroom, eating or preparing food, or handling human or animal waste. But nearly half say that they have neglected to wash their hands in some situations, particularly after grocery shopping, visiting a restaurant, or visiting a healthcare setting (doctor's office, pharmacy, clinic, or hospital). Of those who did not wash their hands, the most frequent reasons given were forgetting to do so or not having access to soap and water.

**DIRTY HANDS
CAN SPREAD
~80% OF
INFECTIOUS
DISEASES**

SCRUB!



INSIGHT

More than half of survey respondents know that washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds helps to effectively reduce the spread of germs

About 6 out of 10 (62%) survey respondents correctly answered that washing their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds effectively reduces the spread of germs. About 1 in 8 (13%) think less time is effective and 1 in 4 (24%) believe that more time is needed. Men were more likely to believe that less time is needed than women (16% vs. 10%).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and most public health experts recommend using soap and water for handwashing, noting that

hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol works when soap and water are not available¹. And adults agree, with 93% reporting that they prefer to wash their hands with soap and water over other methods, such as hand sanitizer or hand wipes.

**PROPER HANDWASHING COULD
SAVE ~1 MILLION LIVES AROUND
THE WORLD EACH YEAR**

Knowledge of How Long to Wash Hands Among US Adults

62%

know that washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds helps to effectively reduce the spread of germs

24%

think that more than 20 seconds is needed

13%

think that less than 20 seconds is effective



INSIGHT

Adults are most likely to wash their hands when using the bathroom or handling food, but age plays a role in handwashing behavior

The top 3 situations that prompt adults to wash their hands are: using the bathroom (69%), handling food (48%), and handling human or animal waste (39%), according to survey data. This is good news, given that a single gram of human feces can contain 1 trillion germs—including *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, and norovirus—that can cause disease². But only 1 out of 3 (30%) respondents say they are most likely to wash their hands after sneezing or coughing, which is concerning given how easily respiratory diseases such as influenza (flu) can spread.

Older adults have a greater risk of getting very sick from infections caused by germs found in feces or food, like *C. diff* (*Clostridioides difficile*) and *Salmonella*^{3,4}. The survey found that adults age 60 years and older are most diligent about handwashing after bathroom use (74%) and after handling food (52%), but only 29% of older adults report that they are most likely to wash their hands after sneezing or coughing.

US Adults Are Most Likely to Wash Their Hands in the Following Situations

69%

after using the bathroom

**48%**

eating, preparing, or handling food

**39%**

handling human or animal waste



INSIGHT

Still, there are many germy places where adults forget to wash their hands

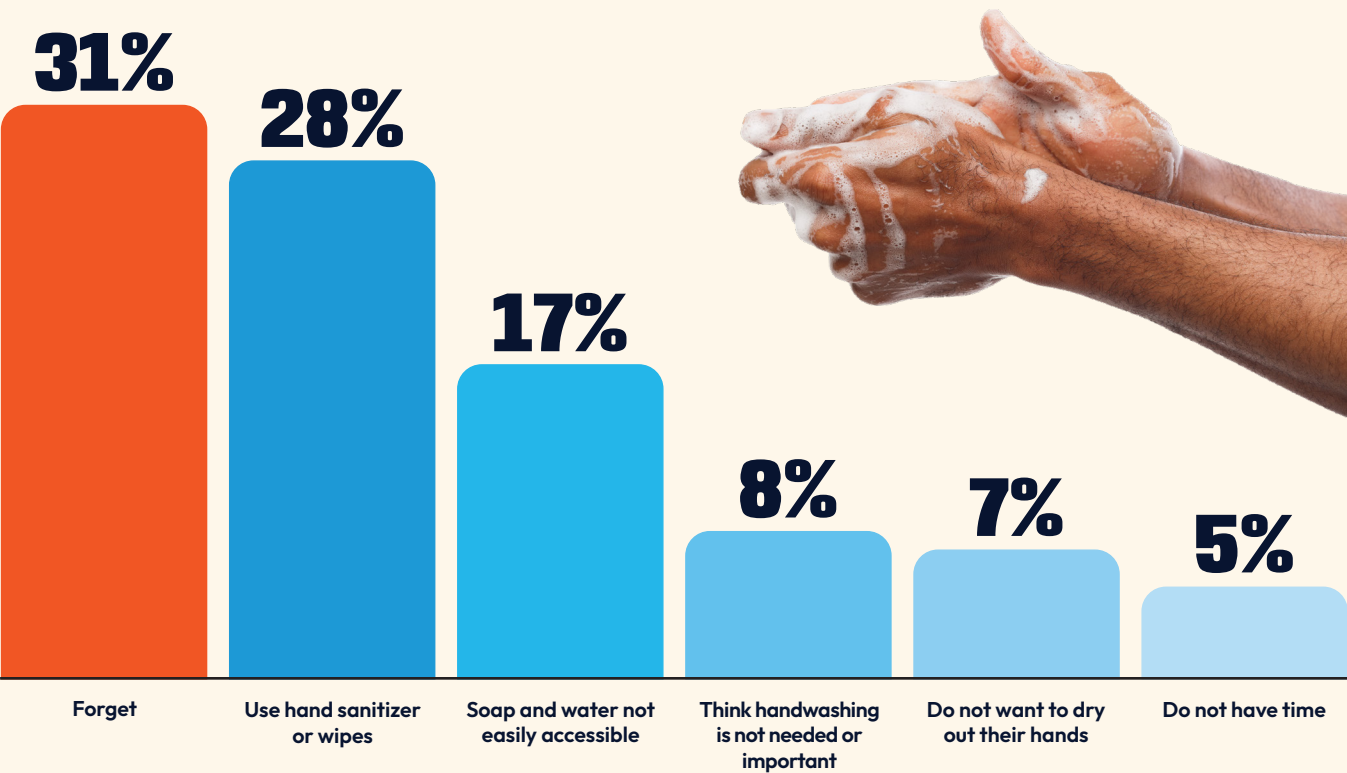
Nearly half of survey respondents (48%) admitted to forgetting or choosing to not wash their hands at key times, like after visiting a grocery store, restaurant or coffee shop, doctor’s office, pharmacy, clinic, or hospital. Men are more likely than women to have reported not washing their hands after visiting these locations, and rationale varies significantly by gender. Men are more likely than women to report simply forgetting (34% vs. 27%), while women are more likely to report not washing with soap and water but instead using an alternative method like hand sanitizer (34% of women vs. 23% of men). Across all survey demographics, forgetting to do so is the

primary reason reported for not washing hands with soap and water.

While forgetting may be the most common reason, 1 in 5 (20%) respondents actively choose not to wash their hands. Almost 1 in 10 (8%) said that handwashing was not necessary or important, while another 12% said that they did not have time or did not want to dry out their hands.

NEARLY HALF (48%) FORGET OR CHOOSE NOT TO WASH THEIR HANDS AT KEY TIMES

Why US Adults Do Not Wash Their Hands With Soap and Water



INSIGHT

For some people, handwashing is a seasonal behavior

Some respondents believe that handwashing is more important in cold weather—1 in 4 (26%) respondents reported washing their hands more frequently in the fall and winter. Younger adults age 18–29 years were more likely to increase or decrease handwashing frequency based on the season, while older adults were more consistent in handwashing behavior throughout the year. The seasonal variance is understandable given that some respiratory diseases, including flu and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), tend to peak during fall and winter. However, other germs—like those that cause colds⁵, norovirus⁶, and other infectious diseases—can spread throughout the year. It is important to maintain proper hand hygiene all year round to help stay healthy.

The survey also found that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on handwashing behavior among US adults, with a third (33%) of respondents reporting that they wash their hands more now than they did during the pandemic. This finding builds on a promising trend—during the pandemic, people reported that they were washing their hands more in 2020 compared to 2019⁷.

**GERMS CAN SPREAD ANYTIME—
SO PUT YOUR HANDS IN FOR
HANDWASHING ALL YEAR LONG**

Seasonal Handwashing Frequency among US Adults

65%

wash their hands
about the same
amount throughout
the year

26%

wash their hands
more frequently
during fall and winter

7%

wash their hands less
frequently during fall
and winter



INSIGHT

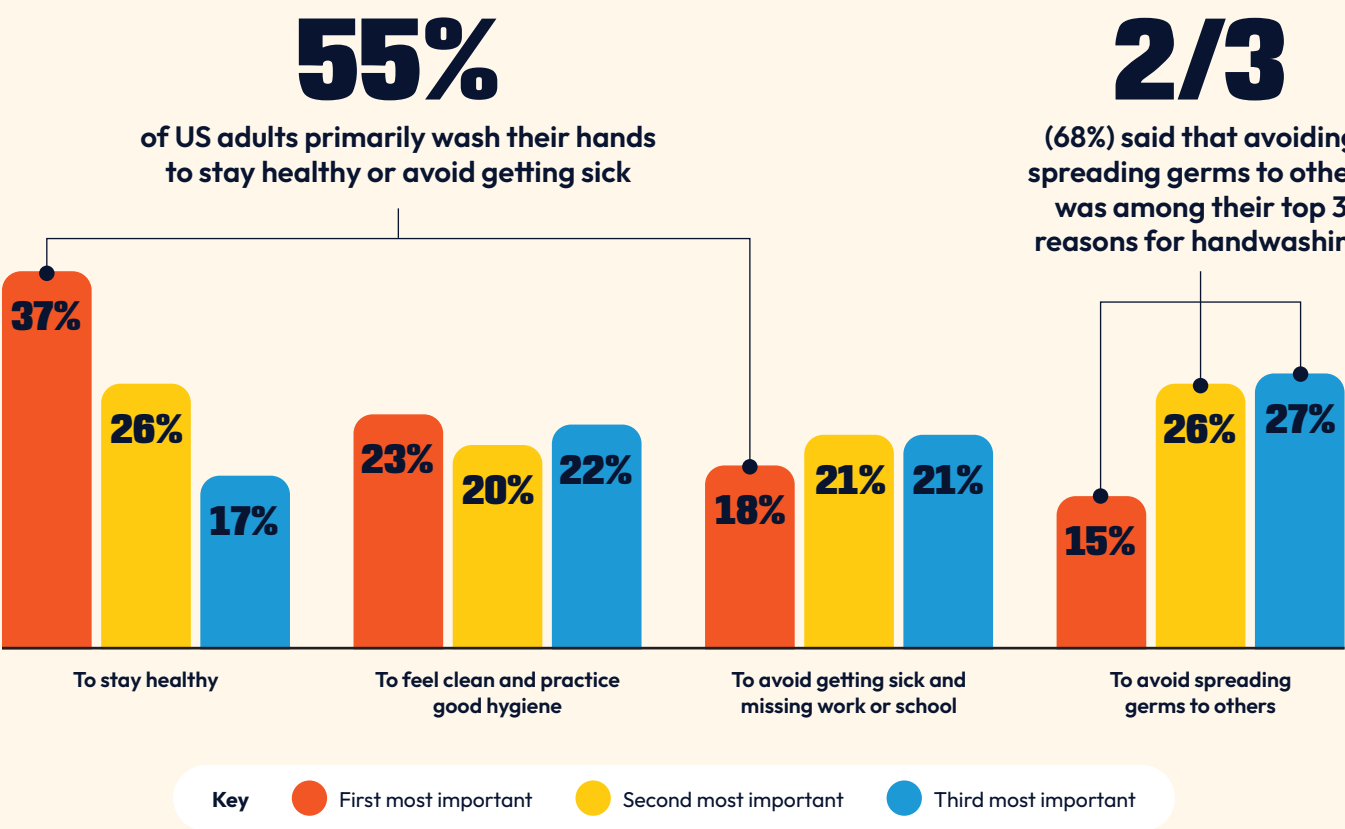
People wash their hands to stay healthy and avoid spreading germs to others

Survey findings show that most US adults wash their hands to help protect their own health. 55% reported that their primary motivation for washing hands was to stay healthy or avoid getting sick. Adults age 60 years and older are particularly motivated to stay healthy—45% say it is the primary driver compared to 31% of those age 18–29 years. This is an important finding since handwashing can reduce respiratory illnesses like colds by up to 21% and reduce diarrhea by up to 40% (up to 58% for people with weakened immune systems)².

While people may be primarily motivated to wash their hands to protect their own health, findings indicate that protecting the health of others is another strong motivator. In fact, more than 2 out of 3 (68%) respondents said that avoiding spreading germs to others was among their top 3 reasons for handwashing.

HANDWASHING IS AN EASY WAY TO HELP PROTECT YOUR HEALTH AND THE HEALTH OF OTHERS

Top Reasons US Adults Wash Their Hands



CONCLUSION

Since about 80% of infectious diseases are spread by dirty hands⁸, routine, proper handwashing throughout the year can significantly help prevent the spread of infectious diseases. In just 20 seconds, handwashing can help prevent the spread of diseases like flu, COVID-19⁹, and norovirus¹⁰.

Data from this survey indicate that while many US adults know the basics of handwashing (washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds in key places where germs are likely to spread), there is still room for improvement in handwashing behavior. The survey highlights a key opportunity to more clearly communicate the benefits of handwashing and address forgetfulness with prompts and messaging in public places. Partnering with trusted messengers can help increase handwashing frequency in places like grocery stores, restaurants, and healthcare settings.

GIVEN THE IMPORTANCE OF HANDWASHING IN INFECTIOUS DISEASE PREVENTION, THE STAKES ARE HIGH—IMPROVING HAND HYGIENE CAN HELP IMPROVE HEALTH FOR ALL.

Visit www.nfid.org/handwashing to learn about the importance of handwashing to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was funded by NFID and conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago as part of the AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a monthly survey using the NORC probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. The US survey received responses from 3,587 respondents from all 50 states and the District of Columbia via online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones. Data was collected in November and December 2024 and March 2025.

The margin of sampling error is ± 2 percentage points for all respondents. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups. Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error and there may be other unmeasured errors in this or any other survey. Black respondents were sampled at a higher rate than their proportion of the population for analysis reasons. The overall margin of sampling error for the total of 587 completed interviews with Black respondents is ± 4.9 percentage points.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Founded in 1973, the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to educating and engaging the public, communities, and healthcare professionals about infectious diseases across the lifespan. For more information, visit www.nfid.org.



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