Talk handwashing in any circle, and its importance is commonly understood. We encounter handwashing warnings and reminders everywhere – signs in restrooms, special sinks in food prep areas, chapters devoted to it in food safety books. A significant piece of the Ecolab 360˚ of Protection® Program is devoted to this important subject – and all for good reason.

Poor personal hygiene is the second leading cause of reported foodborne illness outbreaks, only behind time and temperature holding.

Hand hygiene is old news.
If you’ve never heard of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis you’re not alone. However, you encounter the results of his findings concerning the spread of illnesses every day of your life. In the nineteenth century, Dr. Semmelweis
became the first to document that handwashing is among the most important factors for reducing the spread of illnesses. Surprisingly, it took years for his simple, yet revolutionary ideas to become widely accepted. Today this belief is common knowledge in all areas of public health, including the healthcare and the foodservice industries.

Even with centuries of experience, compliance remains low. Dr. Semmelweis had to fight his culture to get his message across. Today, our culture knows that employee handwashing is one of the most effective ways to help control the spread of illnesses in foodservice operations. Yet compliance is still a major problem.

According to an FDA report compiled in 2000, workers in the quick service and full service restaurant industries averaged only 55% compliance. Many factors contribute to these low compliance rates. The initial education and training for workers in the foodservice industry is often limited. High turnover rates contribute to the problem, as well as a lack of formal training in disease prevention.

In addition, handwashing practices are often inadequate for a variety of reasons. Frequent, thorough handwashing is often inconvenient, time consuming and irritating to the skin. If the handwash sink and soap dispenser are not readily available, employees are less likely to wash their hands at the appropriate times.

“Handwashing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection.”
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The importance of handwashing cannot be overstated. And while washing hands doesn’t require much thought or effort, it does require presence of mind.

Set an example for those around you.
Remember when to wash hands:
Before handling food, and after...
- Using the restroom.
- Touching hair, face or body.
- Shaking hands.
- Sneezing, coughing, or using a handkerchief or tissue.
- Smoking, eating, drinking, or chewing gum or tobacco.
- Using any cleaning, polishing or sanitizing chemical.
- Taking out garbage.
- Clearing tables.
- Touching clothing, aprons or towels.
- Touching anything else that may contaminate hands – door knobs, unsanitized equipment or work surfaces.
- Wash hands at least once an hour – even if you haven’t done anything listed above.

“Happy Birthday” and other proper handwashing tools and techniques.

In the 2005 Food Code, the FDA offers well-defined guidelines for proper handwashing techniques in food safety protocols.

1. Wet hands.
2. Use a good hand soap.
3. Rub hands vigorously for at least 20 seconds. (As long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” to yourself twice)
4. Pay special attention to areas near and under fingernails.
5. Rinse thoroughly under clean running water.
6. Dry well with paper towels.

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In the 2005 Food Code, the FDA offers well-defined guidelines for proper handwashing techniques in food safety protocols.

The Food Code also defines proper conditions for handwashing that could positively influence the success of any hand hygiene program.

1. Locate hand wash sinks conveniently within easy reach of the employee. They must not be obstructed by equipment or other items that may interfere with employee access.

2. Maintain an adequate flow of warm water.

3. Place an appropriate soap dispenser and towels strategically above the hand wash sink. If the dispenser is empty or not working properly, the effect on hand cleanliness can vary dramatically.

The same 2000 FDA report showed that workers throughout the healthcare industry were the most compliant, with an average 80% demonstrating good personal hygiene practices. The report also showed that workers in the food retail industry (grocery stores) exhibited 78% compliance.

Typically, there is extensive education and training in the healthcare industry, and handwashing is stressed as an integral part of the healthcare regimen. Raising hand hygiene awareness and compliance levels can still be achieved in our industry by adapting ongoing training measures, providing hand care products that are easy and pleasant to use, as well as monitoring compliance.

Take care of your hands while you work.

During hand washing, hand soaps not only remove soils, but also the natural oils that protect the skin. Variations in the loss of these natural oils are affected by the frequency of handwashing, the temperature of the water and the rinsability of the soap. Hand soaps that do not rinse easily are more likely to leave soap and soil residues that can increase the potential for skin irritation. Hands are not clean if any soil/soap remains. In order to address all these issues, hand care products should be fortified with ingredients that replenish the skin and decrease irritation.

After all, food safety is our number one goal.

A successful hand care program, designed as part of a food safety initiative, should include ongoing training. Other important aspects of a successful hand care program include selection and location of appropriate dispensing systems and handwash sink as well as a product’s cleaning effectiveness, mildness and rinsability. Each of these factors contributes to user satisfaction, which can improve compliance, help minimize food safety issues, and greatly reduce your risk and liability of foodborne illness related problems.

The 360° of Protection® Program offers solutions that help foodservice operators take control over food safety risks with the following products and services:

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