

Beware the false security of wearing plastic gloves

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SINGAPORE is very fortunate as the entire population has access to clean water, soap and handwashing facilities. But are these actually used by individuals and by food handlers, whether in hawker centres or fancy restaurants? Anecdotal information indicates this is often not the case.

Parents who sneeze on their hands and continue feeding their children; people coming out of the toilets and leaving after looking at themselves in the mirror while rinsing only the tips of their fingers (including food and beverage handlers); and mobile phones that are taken to the toilet and then to the table, are common scenes. Many food handlers, most shockingly, wear gloves for all tasks with little consideration for the health of their clients. One can easily make a long list with these types of examples, which we all have witnessed at some point.

There are reasons for concern. One wonders if both the sweaty hands of the food handlers at the end of the day, and the gloves they wear, would pass random microbiological tests by health authorities. Equally important, shouldn't we, as customers, demand more hygiene in the handling of food that we and our families eat, which in turn will protect our health and that of our families and friends? Availability of clean water is a problem mostly faced by populations in developing countries. Lack of proper hygiene is not; it is a problem all over the world.

BASIC HYGIENE

During normal times, and much more under times of serious health constraints, it is rather surprising that people have to be reminded on a daily basis of the importance of following basic hygiene practices, handwashing being one of the most important ones.

It is also surprising that food handlers from stalls to reputable restaurant chains, not in poor cities, but in cities in the developed world, seem to have replaced hand washing with plastic gloves. Surprisingly, the same pair of plastic gloves are used for multiple tasks: serving food, taking dishes to tables, collecting used dishes, cleaning dirty surfaces and handling money, only to serve food again. Also surprising is that some people have forgotten that using cutlery to serve is much safer than using the hands directly, especially when they have not been washed or not washed properly.

For decades, it has been reiterated that infections can be avoided by simply washing hands with soap. That this has to be done before handling, preparing or eating food, washing dishes, attending

to children or sick persons. Also, after using the toilet, blowing nose, coughing or sneezing, coming home after work or an outing, changing diapers and touching common surfaces like lift buttons, escalators, hand railings, etc. It is one of the safest ways for individuals to protect themselves and their families. It is even more important now during the current coronavirus epidemic as it can protect the entire society from getting sick.

According to the Global Handwashing Partnership, handwashing reduces the rate of respiratory and gastrointestinal infections by removing pathogens, and preventing them from entering the body or being passed on to other people. In the case of respiratory infections, their evidence suggests that washing hands with soap, not merely rinsing them with water, after defecating and before eating, can reduce infections by up to 25 per cent.

SIMPLE BUT ESSENTIAL

Regular hand washing is a simple but essential process to protect the health of millions. Therefore, the World Health Organization (WHO) is committed to creating global awareness of its importance. WHO has designated May 5 as the day to fight antibiotic resistance by cleaning hands: "Save lives: Clean Your Hands." The objective is to prevent infections by the simple act of practising hand hygiene. Furthermore, the Global Handwashing Day on Oct 15 also aims at increasing understanding of the importance of handwashing with soap as an effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and save lives.

The 2017 Global Burden of Disease Study notes that worldwide, less than 35 per cent of people had access to handwashing facilities with soap and water in 2017. Clearly, much more needs to be done in numerous countries so that people have access to clean water, soap and facilities to practise basic hygiene. A radical change in mindsets regarding basic hygiene is necessary among many members of society. Those who are responsible for others, and those who handle food and beverages, bear an enormous responsibility to ensure public safety. As has been proven with the ongoing outbreak, the actions of a few can impact negatively on the lives of many. The simple task of proper and regular handwashing is what social responsibility means in practice.

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