

# COVID-19



Reynolds Health Strategies

## Handwashing and COVID-19 Prevention for Unhoused People

### Prevention Strategies

Washing hands with soap and water is one of the best things we can do to prevent any number of infections and diseases, including COVID-19. While it is true that washing or disinfecting hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer are gold standard for disease prevention, it's not always easy to access the necessary resources, especially for people who use drugs and people without reliable housing.

Here are some tips to help you problem-solve for alternatives when soap, water or hand sanitizer are unavailable:

- **Check with a syringe service provider for hand-cleaning supplies.** The local SSP, drop-in center, or medical clinic might have hand sanitizer or bar soap, or referrals for handwashing stations in your area. Check in with them frequently.
- **Check for emergency housing.** Many cities/counties are setting up hotel/motel rooms for people to stay in during the COVID-19 outbreak. Check with your local homeless services center, community-based organization or syringe service program to see if this option is available.
- **Look for places with water faucets.** Are there places around you with accessible, public faucets— like public parks or gas stations? Sometimes you can find a working faucet near businesses that have flowerbeds or outdoor plants. Don't get in trouble: try to ask for permission first before using them.
- **Carry your own soap and water.** Carrying a bottle of water and a bar of soap is a good option if you can't get to a sink regularly. Follow the same hand washing rule as you would in a sink: Get your hands wet, use the bar soap to work up a lather, rub for 20 seconds and then rinse with water. Keep the water bottle as clean as you can by wiping it off with alcohol prep, rubbing alcohol, or soap.
- **Alternatives to soap.** Ideally, you should carry some liquid or bar soap, but if these aren't available, you can use body wash. Shampoo will work, too. You can even use dish soap, but it could have ingredients that irritate your skin.
- **Use rubbing alcohol.** Common rubbing alcohol can disinfect COVID-19. Rinsing your hands with rubbing alcohol is an alternative to soap and water or hand sanitizer. It needs to be at least 70% isopropyl to work. It is relatively inexpensive and carried in pharmacies and grocery stores (but it can be hard to find). Pour some on the palm of your hand and rub it around for at least 20 seconds and make sure your entire hands are covered. Note: It may irritate your hands. It can also dry out your hands, so use some lotion to keep them moisturized if you have some.
- **Use alcohol prep pads.** Grab as many alcohol prep pads as you can from your local syringe service program (Note: supplies may be hard for them to order right now, so they may have limits on what they can give). These pads have 70% isopropyl alcohol, and that's enough to disinfect COVID-19. Use a bunch of them: 1 per finger, one on the back of your hand and one for your palm. This can also dry out your hands, so use some lotion to keep them moisturized if you can.

More info at  
[PreventEpidemics.org](https://PreventEpidemics.org)  
[ResolveToSaveLives.org](https://ResolveToSaveLives.org)  
[VitalStrategies.org](https://VitalStrategies.org)

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#### Things that DO NOT disinfect hands from COVID-19:

- |   |                                                        |   |                                                                                        |
|---|--------------------------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Non-alcohol-based hand sanitizer                       | 4 | Witch Hazel                                                                            |
| 2 | Non-alcohol-based hand sanitizer                       | 5 | Vinegar                                                                                |
| 3 | Hand sanitizer that does not have at least 60% alcohol | 6 | Vodka (or really any drinkable alcohol...it's just not strong enough to kill COVID-19) |

## The Gold Standard: Hand-Washing with Soap and Water or Alcohol-Based Hand Sanitizer

Washing hands seems like a basic, mundane activity, but it is actually one the best things you can do to prevent any number of diseases, including COVID-19. When you have access to a sink and running water, this is the ideal choice for cleaning and disinfecting hands. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention give us five steps for a good hand washing<sup>1</sup>:

### STEP ONE: Wet Your Hands with Clean, Running Water

- The water can be hot, warm or cold
- Get your hands wet up to the wrist
- Turn the faucet off
- Put the soap on

### STEP TWO: Lather Up!

- Work the soap up into a lather
- Get the bubbles to cover the backs of your hand and in-between the fingers
- Don't forget your fingernails: Rub the tips of your fingers and work soap underneath the fingernails.

### STEP THREE: Scrub for 20 Seconds

- The friction pulls the virus (and other germs) away from your skin
- Rub those hands—front and back—for 20 seconds
- You can sing the ABCs to keep count, or the “Happy Birthday” song twice from beginning to end

### STEP FOUR: Rinse Your Hands under Running Water

- Get all the bubbles and soap residue off your hands
- Use running water and not standing water in a bowl
- Pouring clean water from a water bottle is a good option, too

### STEP FIVE: Dry Your Hands

- If you use a towel or paper towel, make sure it's a clean one.
- You can also just let them air dry naturally

## What to do if you can't get to running water and soap: Alcohol-Based Hand Sanitizer

It can be hard to get access to a sink and running water for unhoused folks. If you have an alcohol-based hand-sanitizer (must have at least 60% alcohol in it), this will disinfect COVID-19 on your hands. Using hand sanitizer is a two-step process<sup>2</sup>

### STEP ONE: Apply hand sanitizer

- Put enough on your hands to cover all of them: Palms, fingers (and in-between fingers), and back of hands.

### STEP TWO: Rub Hands Together

- Rub them together—the friction is good for removing germs and viruses—until they feel dry (this should also be about 20 seconds)
- Don't dry your hands with a towel: Let the sanitizer dry by rubbing.

1 <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/show-me-the-science-handwashing.html#three>

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/hand-sanitizer-use.html>