



## **Episode Five-Handwashing**

Welcome to episode 5 of Food Safety Bites Brought to you the University of Wisconsin Madison, and funded by the USDA Food Safety Outreach Program, this is your host Harriet Behar. This episode is **focused on handwashing**. In these podcast episodes, I will identify issues, and provide suggestions for how to reduce various fresh produce contamination risks and keep your customers safe. We will not talk in detail about what is required for a GAP audit or a FSMA inspection. If you want more information on those, please see the links on the website where you found these podcasts.

### **Why do you and anyone else touching fresh produce need to care about clean hands?**

Effective and timely handwashing could be the most important anti-contamination step to prevent transfer of bacteria from people to food. Even though we have all been washing our hands since we were barely tall enough to reach into the sink, most people could use a refresher on why hand washing is so important, and how to wash your hands to remove all of the nasty microorganisms that could cause sickness to others.

Our skin covered with bacteria, although most of it will not cause problems to others. Think about how many times we shake hands, or touch doorknobs that have recently been touched by others. On the other hand (pun intended), every time you touch something, unknown bacteria can get transferred between you and the surface and the surface and you. We cannot see these microorganisms; we don't know what they are and we cannot know if there is a chance that there are some bacteria may make people sick. That is why we wash our hands.

**When do we need to wash our hands?** Hands should be washed after going to bathroom, activities such as smoking since there is hand to mouth contact, any interaction with livestock or livestock feces, even just petting your cat or dog, since they may have touched or rolled in things that you don't know about. One of the most important times you should wash your hands (and train your crew to wash their hands) is before they start to harvest, wash or pack the vegetables. Think of it as scrubbing into surgery - you are going to touch someone's food, and it might be the last time someone touches that vegetable before it is eaten. Therefore, that harvest or postharvest step should be something that you take seriously and do with freshly washed hands. Things like weeding or transplanting are less important to focus on handwashing, since you aren't touching the actual produce someone will be eating, though hands should always be washed throughout the workday.

To be more efficient, consider setting up a work schedule where dirty activities like weeding or greenhouse work is done first, the crew cleans up and then starts their post-harvest washing and packing. Or have two crews, one in the field and one in the pack shed, to lessen risk of excess dirt coming into the area where you are packing. The work put into cleaning and sanitizing a work surface, which is covered in a subsequent episode, would all be for naught if someone then touches that work surface with muddy hands.



**Effective handwashing.** A stream of clean water flowing over your hands is the goal. Warm water is nice, but not necessary, although it does help with making a foamy lather when using the necessary soap. Remember that soap is essential, and it doesn't need to be antibacterial. It is better to use soap in a bottle with a hand pump than a bar of soap. That soap is single use, just like the stream of water, and won't spread unwanted bacteria. Think about what a bar of soap looks like after someone with muddy hands has just used it, plenty of dirt is still present on that bar to then be spread to the next user.

Hand sanitizer is NOT a substitute for soap. In a later episode, I will cover the difference between cleaning and sanitizing a food contact surface, and your hands are a food contact surface too. Hand sanitizers are not effective if your hands are not clean and are not typically needed if you are doing a good job of washing your hands. The lather of the soap, and the vigorous scrubbing or rubbing of your hands pulls the dirt and bacteria off the surface of your hands so it can be rinsed off with the clean water.

**Let's go over good handwashing protocols.** First take off any watches or rubber bands you might have on your wrists and pull up sleeves. Turn on the water and get both of your hands wet, then apply soap and make a lather. Be aggressive- the friction and abrasion are important to loosening the dirt. First wash with palms together, then one palm over the back of the other hand and switch hands. Use the ends of your fingers in order to drive soap up under your fingernails, clean the dirt from around your cuticles too. It is important to do this for at least 20 seconds. Sing the ABC song twice, or happy birthday, or counting 1-100, 2-100 until you get to twenty, whatever works for you. Rinse off the soap under your fingernails and both sides of your hands. Don't be afraid to wash your wrists and arms too, if they are dirty! Go over good handwashing protocols with all workers who handle produce in the field or in the pack shed. Signage in the bathroom and around the pack shed, reminding people to use the hand wash station, is also a good idea to instill effective and repeated handwashing as a habit for all that handle produce.

Okay, now your hands are clean, don't dirty them by wiping your hands dry on your pants, shirt, or well used cloth towel. Single use dispenser paper hand towels are the best, but you could use cloth towels as long as they are washed after one use. Dry your hands by applying pressure to your skin to remove water and also any remaining bacteria. Dispose of these towels in a way so others do not need to touch them. A swinging top container or a garbage can with a top that opens with a foot lever works well. You want to avoid touching anything beyond produce with your clean hands. A closed top container will prevent the towels from blowing away. Depending on the types of spigots or soap dispensers you have, a clean towel can be used to close a spigot after the hands are clean, to avoid recontamination.

So that's it for this episode of Food Safety Bites, the next episode is handwash stations, this is your host Harriet Behar brought to you by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, talk to you next time!