Splish Splash

By Wendy Marks
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"Wash your hands! You will bring in germs." I remember my mother shouting as we came in grubby and sticky from an afternoon of playing outdoors. While this is still good advice, we may have to become more educated about what we are washing with and what we want to kill. Soap used to be a simple affair, plain and without harmful chemicals. But in our desire to kill germs we have created some different problems. In fact, some soaps contain chemicals you should avoid. It makes sense to choose safer soaps, because who wants to wash off chemicals with more chemicals?

Here are some simple guidelines to help decide what is good for killing what we want and leaving what we want. First of all, anti-bacterial soap offers no benefits. A U.S. FDA advisory committee found that use of antibacterial soaps provides no benefits over plain soap and water. Anti-bacterial soaps do kill bacteria and microbes -- but so do plain soap and water. When you wash your hands, it's the duration that matters. Sing the happy birthday song twice to get effective germ elimination. Really.

The main reason to avoid anti-bacterial soaps is the main active ingredient: triclosan. Triclosan is an anti-bacterial chemical found in many consumer products, and it's nearly ubiquitous in liquid hand soap. It has been linked to liver and inhalation toxicity, and even low levels of triclosan may disrupt thyroid function. The American Medical Association recommends that triclosan not be used in the home, as it may encourage bacterial resistance to antibiotics.

Triclosan also affects the natural environment. Wastewater treatment does not remove all of this chemical, which means it ends up in our lakes, rivers and water sources. This is especially unfortunate since triclosan is very toxic to aquatic life.

When you choose safer soaps, knowing what ingredients to avoid is a good starting point, but identifying safer alternatives is an equally important next step. Traditional, "plain" soap and water is the most effective and least problematic for hand washing.

Always check the ingredient list! When you're at the store, read those labels - triclosan and triclocarbon will be listed, making it easy to leave them on the shelf and find safer soaps. Choose liquid and bar soaps and hand sanitizers that don't contain triclosan, and added fragrance is another ingredient worth avoiding. You can find liquid hand soaps and hand sanitizers that don't contain triclosan, triclocarbon or fragrance by checking the Environmental Working Group, EWG.org, which is a free web site that promotes safety in foods and related products.

Wet wipes have some of the same problems as soaps. I know I take them as a convenient way to clean up when traveling. Stick to brands that have few chemicals like Seventh Generation. A tip, I use them to wash my face safely when traveling and avoid bringing fancier cosmetics on trips.

Hand sanitizers have become very popular. If you like the convenience of waterless hand sanitizers, alcohol-based sanitizers are a better bet because they don't contain triclosan or triclocarbon. Some hand sanitizers don't even have alcohol bases; I particularly like Clean Well, a thyme sanitizer that is alcohol free. But remember: Hand sanitizers don't prevent hand-to-mouth chemical transfers as effectively as soap and water do, because their purpose is to kill bacteria, not to remove the dust and dirt that can harbor chemicals. Also, when washing with water, product ingredients are partially washed off, whereas all ingredients in hand sanitizers are left to fully absorb into your skin. So use them with caution.

So listen to mom, and wash your hands when coming in from play or other environments, but do so safely.

Happy Spring! Wendy