

Hand Washing, How important is it?

Most people say they wash their hands after using the bathroom. But a new study suggests that many of them are not telling the truth.

The researchers demonstrated that people were not as conscientious as they say they were by comparing answers given in a telephone poll to observed behavior.

In the nationwide poll, conducted from Aug. 19 to Aug. 22 by Harris Interactive, 1,013 adults were interviewed about their hand washing habits. Then observers were sent into public restrooms to see what actually happened.

(Ninety-one percent of adults claimed in the poll that they washed their hands after using a public restroom.) But of the 6,336 adults whose behavior was observed, only 82 percent actually did so.)

(Women, the study found, were more diligent than men: 90 percent washed their hands, compared with only 75 percent of the men.)

Michael T. Osterholm, chairman of the public health committee of the American Society of Microbiologists, which commissioned the survey, said he could not explain what accounted for the difference.

"I don't think anyone knows why men are so much less likely to wash than women," he said. "People who use urinals probably think they don't need to wash their hands. But the overall message is that most Americans do wash their hands after using the bathroom, even though we have a long way to go."

Dr. Osterholm is also a professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota.

The observations for the study were made at restrooms in six locations: Turner Field in Atlanta, the Museum of Science and Industry and the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, Grand Central Terminal and Penn Station in New York, and the Ferry Terminal Farmers Market in San Francisco.

At Turner Field in Atlanta, home field of the Atlanta Braves, people were less likely to wash when they left a public bathroom than at any other location. Only 74 percent of baseball fans washed up, an even lower percentage than among commuters at Penn Station in New York, where 79 percent washed their hands.

San Franciscans are apparently very hygienic: 88 percent of people using public bathrooms at the Farmers Market stopped to wash before leaving. The only people more sanitary were those at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago: 89 percent washed their hands before leaving.

The telephone poll asked about hand washing in other situations as well. Fewer than half of adults said they always washed after touching a pet, sneezing or handling money. Washing hands after changing a baby's diaper is also far from a universal habit, with only 64 percent of men and 82 percent of women reporting that they did so. And most people wash up before handling food, but by no means all: 23 percent of adults said they regularly handled food without first washing.

In all these situations, women reported more hand washing than men.

Education and income level have something to do with hand washing practices, but it is not clear exactly what the differences mean.

Among those who make less than \$40,000 a year, 24 percent said they washed their hands after handling money. But only 18 percent of those who make more than \$40,000 consider money dirty enough to require washing after touching it.

The telephone survey found that people who have been to college are slightly more likely than those who only finished high school to report that they wash their hands after using a public bathroom. Yet people with more education are less likely to say they wash up after touching a pet, coughing, or sneezing. Education made little difference in whether a person reported hand washing after changing a diaper. About 25 percent of people, whether they went to college or not and no matter how much they earned, said they do not bother to wash after performing this chore.

"It's not about education," said Dr. Osterholm. "It's about hygiene education. We have a problem at hospitals with doctors and nurses who don't wash their hands after seeing a patient. You can't get more educated than that."