

Handwashing with soap – our best defence against *coronavirus*

Wash'Em

The global spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has resulted in public officials and mainstream media encouraging people to wash their hands with soap as regularly as possible. The simple act of handwashing with soap remains our best defence against coronavirus, other outbreak pathogens and common global killers such as diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory infections. However, rates of handwashing with soap at critical times (such as after using the toilet or before eating) are less than 20% globally.

In this guide we give you practical tips for how to encourage community-level handwashing behaviour with the aim of controlling and preventing the spread of the coronavirus. This guide is not a technical brief about COVID-19, please refer to reliable sources such as the [CDC](#) or [WHO](#) for this information. If you are working on water, sanitation or hygiene we recommend you read [this technical guide](#) also.

How to change handwashing behaviour:

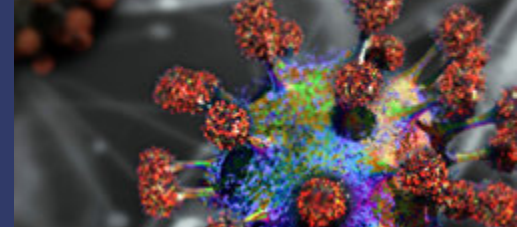
- Globally most people know the benefits of handwashing. Despite knowing this, people all around the world often forget or deprioritize handwashing with soap. To really change behavior we need to do more than just hygiene education.
- People sometimes don't practice handwashing because it is inconvenient or because they have other priorities. So to change handwashing behaviour we need to create an enabling environment, establish positive social norms and make it a desirable thing to do.
- In an outbreak people normally start to wash their hands more frequently and more thoroughly. This is because they perceive themselves to be more vulnerable to disease than usual. Our job is to support this natural instinct without creating unnecessary fear and do so in a way that establishes handwashing as a habitual practice that persists even after the outbreak.



What is Wash'Em and how does it relate to coronavirus?

Wash'Em provides humanitarian organisations with a way of designing rapid, evidence-based, and context adapted hygiene programmes. The Wash'Em process combines 5 rapid assessment tools to learn about the determinants of handwashing behaviour with a software that helps humanitarians to identify contextualised hygiene promotion activities. To date Wash'Em has been used in 34 humanitarian emergencies by 45 NGOs. In each case Wash'Em has facilitated handwashing programmes to be designed in just a week.

Wash'Em has also been used in the acute phase of cholera outbreaks and for Ebola prevention. Wash'Em is also a useful resource for hygiene promotion in the context of coronavirus because it includes a set of 80 easy-to-implement activities that can be used to promote handwashing in regions of the world where the coronavirus is spreading.

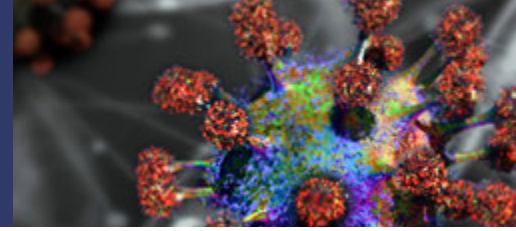


Early stage response recommendations:

The activities below are designed to be used in the coming month (March 2020) for coronavirus control and prevention. They have been chosen because they are quick, easy, and low cost.

- 1 Make handwashing easier by increasing the availability of handwashing facilities, soap and water.** Did you know that the presence of a handwashing facility can make people 60% more likely to wash their hands? Focus on providing handwashing infrastructure in visible places. This may include at the entrance of buildings, in places where lots of people gather (like markets or bus stops) and in places where handwashing is most needed (outside toilets and in places where people eat). Read our [guide](#) on how to design handwashing infrastructure that will actually change behaviour.
- 2 Share real experiences of the coronavirus.** When a new disease emerges it can create a lot of fear. It is normal to be worried about an outbreak like coronavirus but fear can cause people to act in unpredictable and harmful ways. We suggest that you partner with health authorities to interview people who have been exposed to the virus and who have recovered. Sharing the lived experiences of these individuals (with their permission) will help you build an accurate understanding of COVID-19. Getting these individuals to speak out about the importance of handwashing with soap is likely to be much more believable and have a much more persuasive effect on the behaviour of others. Find out more about how to do this activity [here](#).
- 3 Make handwashing messages surprising.** Placing messages (e.g. on posters) in key locations can act as a cue to remind people to wash their hands with soap at critical times. However if these posters stay the same they will begin to go unnoticed and may no longer trigger handwashing behaviour. Changing the handwashing message every few days will help to capture people's attention time and time again. While COVID-19 is a serious disease our handwashing messaging can still be aspirational and fun. Find out more about this activity [here](#) as well as examples of hygiene messages that can be used on rotation.
- 4 Remind people of the power of soap!** Soap has been around for since 2800BC so it is easy to forget what a miracle product it is. In most countries people often just wash their hands with water - but handwashing without soap will not result in truly clean hands. Wash'Em includes several fun activities to show the power of soap. All you need are simple props like pepper, glitter, Vaseline and water. Watch these videos and try these when you visit communities or within workplaces and schools. Make sure to assess the risk before doing any in person activities in the areas where you work. If the risk is high you can also share these activities on social media so people can try them at home.
 - [Get away from germs](#)
 - [Glittery hands](#)





5 Normalise and celebrate handwashing. Controlling an outbreak like coronavirus requires the whole community to work together and practice handwashing with soap regularly. Rewarding people when they do the right thing is more likely to encourage them to do it again and can lead to long-lasting habit formation. If you are working in a setting where social media is common, then share photos of people washing their hands with soap and praise them for doing the right thing. If you are working in a setting where social media is less common, then consider creating a champions wall where you feature similar photos on a wall in a public place. Find out more about how to do these activities by following the links.

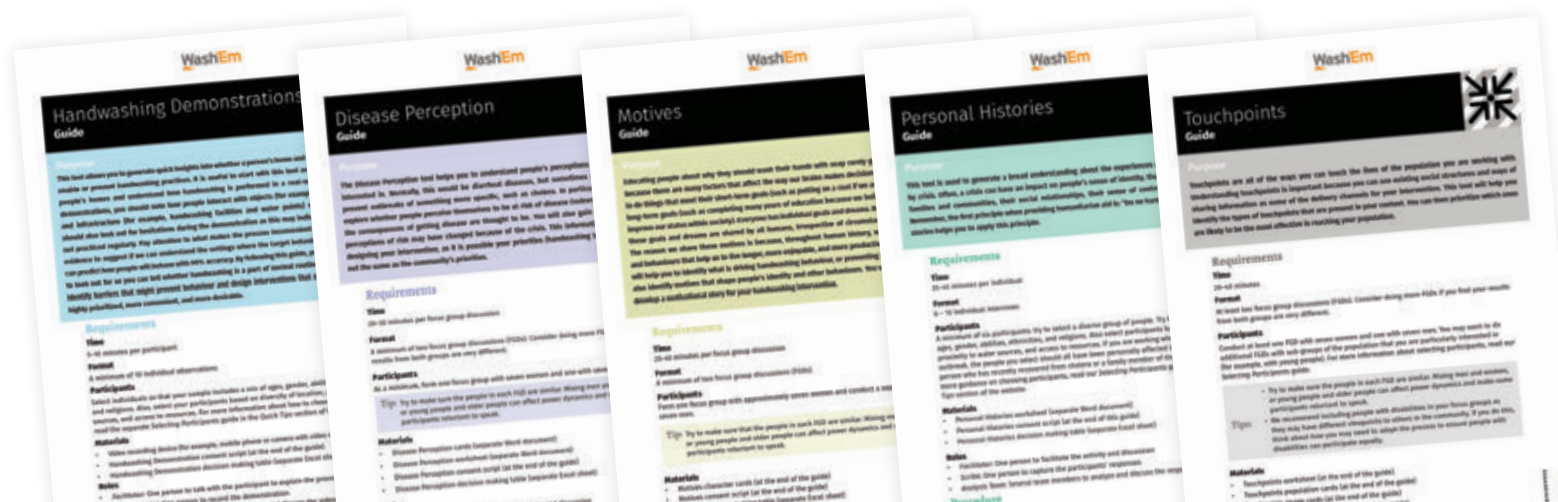
- [Social media recognition](#)
- [Recognition wall](#)

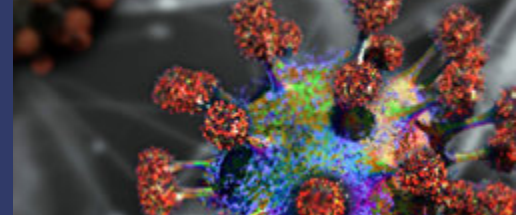
A longer term approach (for use if COVID-19 continues to spread)

The activities above are designed to be simple short-term ideas to promote handwashing with soap in countries where coronavirus is spreading. If the coronavirus continues, those implementing hygiene promotion programmes will need to change their approach in the following months. This is because behaviour change is complex and often you need to include a range of activities which reach people through a range of mediums in order to sustain behaviour. From April 2020 onwards it may be worth developing a contextualised and longer-term response to the COVID-19 outbreak. For this we suggest using the Wash'Em process. To learn about Wash'Em visit our [website](#) or access the [software](#). Here you can download the rapid assessment tools and the training package or watch video-based guides. You can also use the software to generate additional handwashing programme activities.

The 5 Wash'Em Rapid Assessment tools can be adapted in simple ways for COVID-19 prevention.

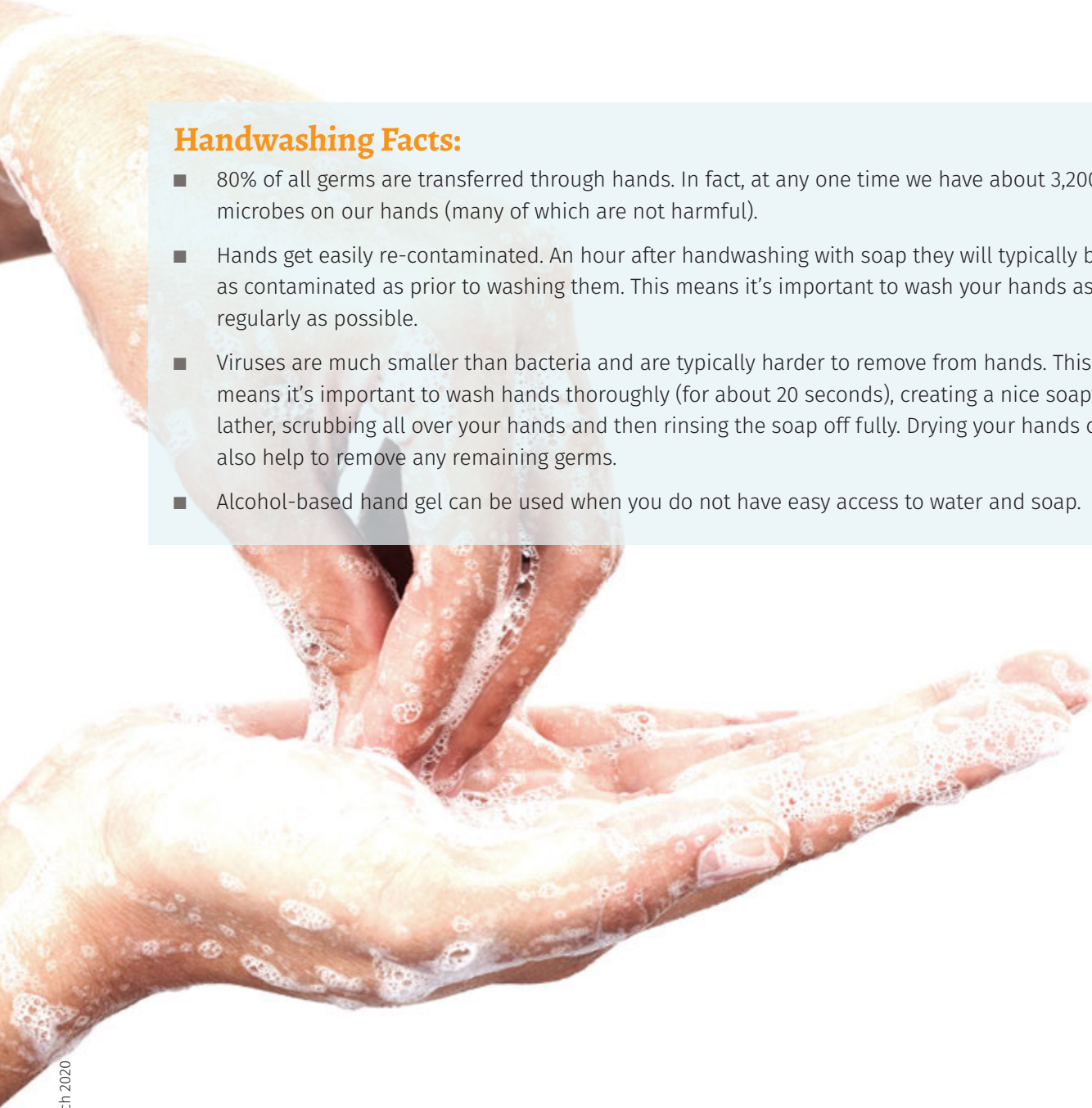
- **Handwashing Demonstrations tool** - use as per the guide
- **Disease perception** - the guide uses diarrhoea as the case study disease. To adapt it change each 'diarrhoea' reference to coronavirus.
- **Motives** - use as per the guide. If you do not have time to do all the Rapid Assessment tools then the Motives tool can be dropped.
- **Personal Histories** - use the worksheet that is designed for outbreak prevention. Adapt the second column so that you ask participants to describe what would happen should they get coronavirus.
- **Touchpoints** - use as per the guide.





Handwashing Facts:

- 80% of all germs are transferred through hands. In fact, at any one time we have about 3,200 microbes on our hands (many of which are not harmful).
- Hands get easily re-contaminated. An hour after handwashing with soap they will typically be as contaminated as prior to washing them. This means it's important to wash your hands as regularly as possible.
- Viruses are much smaller than bacteria and are typically harder to remove from hands. This means it's important to wash hands thoroughly (for about 20 seconds), creating a nice soapy lather, scrubbing all over your hands and then rinsing the soap off fully. Drying your hands can also help to remove any remaining germs.
- Alcohol-based hand gel can be used when you do not have easy access to water and soap.



Developed on the 9th March 2020

Wash'Em

