

Stop germs with proper hand washing
Lauren Healey, 4-H Youth Development Agent

Just as homework and projects are a fact of life when school gets back in session, the same is true for runny noses and doctor's visits. According to the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, children have about 6-10 colds a year. In families with children in school, the number of colds per child can be as high as 12 per year.

The Center for Disease Control states that there are more than 52 million cases of the common cold each year among Americans under the age of 17. One important reason colds are so common in this age group is because most of the school day is spent in close contact with each other. Nearly 22 million school days are lost due to the common cold alone.

Your children are not doomed to spend the entire school year at home or behind a tissue, however - there is hope!

One of the most important things we can do to keep from getting sick and spreading illness to others is to clean our hands – correctly and often. The National Sanitation Foundation lists six steps for proper hand washing:

Step 1: Wet hands with warm, running water.

Step 2: Apply liquid, bar or powdered soap.

Step 3: Rub your hands together for 20 seconds. Make sure to wash the backs, palms, and in between fingers. Wash for the amount of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" (or say the 4-H Pledge) - twice! Make sure you turn the faucet off while scrubbing to help save water.

Step 4: Wash underneath the fingernails. Use a nailbrush if possible.

Step 5: Rinse your hands under warm, running water.

Step 6: Dry your hands on a clean paper towel, or use a hot air dryer. If possible, use the paper towel to turn the faucet off.

If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand wipe or sanitizer gel. When using hand sanitizers make sure to rub hands together until all parts of hand and fingers are covered and continue until sanitizer is dry. While hand sanitizers do reduce the amount of germs, it should not be a substitute for soap and water if possible.

Some viruses and bacteria can live from 20 minutes up to two hours or more on surfaces like cafeteria tables, doorknobs, and desks. Therefore, hands should be washed often. Especially after coughing or sneezing, after using the bathroom, and before eating or drinking.

For more information about the 4-H program or other youth development issues, contact the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Office at (706) 769-3946 or stop by our office located behind the Oconee County Courthouse.