

# PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

## COVID-19 and Hand Sanitizers: Debunking the Myths

Fenny Zen, MD

*Ronald Januchowski, DO, FACOFP, Editor • Paula Gregory, DO, MBA, CHCQM, FAIHQ, Health Literacy Editor*

COVID-19 is caused by a new coronavirus not previously seen in humans and is spread from person to person, mainly through respiratory droplets. Ways to prevent COVID-19 include wearing a mask and practicing hand hygiene, including handwashing or alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizer). The exact contribution of hand hygiene in reducing the direct and indirect spread of coronaviruses is still unknown, however, data have shown that hand sanitizer formulations in the range of alcohol concentrations recommended by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) inactivate the virus.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The CDC recommends using hand sanitizer greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol in health care settings. They must be formulated with emollients to protect the skin's health while reducing pathogens on the hands. The alcohol in hand sanitizers works best when you rub it all over your hands, making sure to get between your fingers, palms and on the back of your hands. The CDC currently does not have a recommended alternative to hand rub products with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol as active ingredients.

### SAFETY

Hand sanitizers should not be stored in temperatures above 105°F. They should also be stored out of reach of children, as even a small amount of ingestion can cause alcohol poisoning. However, there is no need to be concerned if children eat with their hands after using hand sanitizer. Denaturants have been added to alcohol to make it less appealing to ingest, so they will not want to continue ingesting once they taste it.

It is equally important to keep the product out of your eyes. If you do get hand sanitizer in your eyes, it is important to flush eyes with lukewarm water for about 10 to 15 minutes. The water needs to rinse the surface of each eye thoroughly. You must blink rapidly as your eyes are being flushed to remove any remaining traces of alcohol. If only one eye is affected, keep the uninjured eye tightly closed and tilt your head so the injured eye is looking downward and flush the affected eye for 10 to 15 minutes. It is extremely important not to contaminate the other eye with alcohol. If your eye(s) are still irritated, burning, red, painful after being flushed, contact your physician.

### ALTERNATIVES

Do not use hand sanitizer if your hands are visibly soiled. Wash your hands with soap and water instead. Hands should be washed with soap and water for at least 20 seconds when they are visibly dirty, before eating and after using the restroom.

### SERIOUS REACTIONS

As convenient of an alternative as hand sanitizers can be, serious reactions can and do occur. Call your doctor if you experience a serious allergic reaction to your hand sanitizer. If you notice your hands start to swell up, peel, crack or blister, stop using that hand sanitizer immediately. If irritant contact dermatitis results from hand sanitizer use, barrier creams, such as petroleum jelly, may be necessary as they are designed to form a protective layer that is not removed by standard hand sanitizing.



**SOURCE(S):** *Federal Drug Administration, UpToDate*

### DOWNLOAD AND DISTRIBUTE

The PDF of this patient education handout is available for easy download and distribution to your patients at [www.acofp.org/PEH](http://www.acofp.org/PEH).

The *Osteopathic Family Physician Patient Handout* is a public service of the ACOFP. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in many instances; however, they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis by a physician. For specific information concerning your medical condition, ACOFP suggests that you consult your family physician. This page may be photocopied noncommercially by physicians and other healthcare professionals to share with their patients.