



## It's OK to Ask

By Ilana Jaqueline

**I'D LIKE TO** think that I'm usually pretty on top of things. Any time I go to the doctor for a physical exam or test, I politely ask that staff wash their hands and put on gloves before they touch me.

Doctors tend to go from room to room and patient to patient carrying files that have been passed from secretary to nurse to intern. They touch doorknobs and cabinet knobs, the lids of jars that hold their cotton swabs and the height controls on the exam table. A long story short: They're a very "handsy" sort of people. And, for patients with sensitive immune systems, these professionals' forgetfulness or delusions of invincibility can be an excellent way of spreading disease.

Maybe as a kid you didn't notice, but now that you're in your 20s, it's time to take charge of these risk factors. When it comes to hand-washing, it's OK to ask. I've done it. Often. And, usually the response is: "Of course, I was going to wash my hands, I just hadn't gotten there yet." OK, fine. Whatever. I just thought I'd ask.

Washing hands has to be one of the first things they re-teach doctors in medical school, right? I know it's on the kindergarten curriculum. I'm sure doctors in training get some sort of hand-washing refresher lesson. But, sometimes I have my doubts. For instance, two weeks ago, I was back in my regular bed at the local emergency room for a nightmare spiral of migraines that had left me, well, let's call it under the weather.

"My head is exploding. Am I the only one seeing this light show?" I moaned to my mother. But before she could answer, a nurse walked in. He was trailing his vitals cart behind him and looked like



someone had just spit in his cereal. He quickly glanced at my chart before grabbing the blood pressure cuff and walking over to me.

"Wait," my mom said, because I was now holding my hands against my head so my brain wouldn't fall out. "Can you wash your hands before you touch her? She has an immune deficiency."

He gave her an exasperated look before bumping the cart toward my mother. He handed me the thermometer, but after three stabs of trying to get the plastic cover to snap on to the top, I gave up (I couldn't even see straight).

"Out," my mom said, "We're done. We want another nurse."

"Whatever," he responded and walked out, sending another nurse into the room a few minutes later.

Moral of the story?

1) Always bring an advocate to the ER with you so they can help you stand up for your patient rights when you can't.

2) The worst thing that can happen when a nurse or doctor refuses to wash their hands is they can say no, and you can ask for a different treating physician or nurse.

Sanitation is not an unreasonable request. Not in the hospital. Not in the doctor's office. It's your responsibility to advocate for yourself.

Having trouble with a doctor or nurse at your local hospital? Feel free to make a call to the administration, give them names and remind them that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one of every 20 patients in a U.S. hospital gets a hospital-acquired infection each year. Hand-washing reduces the number of people who get sick by 31 percent in those with healthy immune systems. Hand-washing reduced illness by 58 percent in those with weakened immune systems. ■



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