

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Cooperative Extension Service

224 S. Main, Suite B-10 • Sheridan, WY 82801

(307) 674-2980 • (307) 675-2988 (fax)



Hand Sanitizers & Food Safety

Sales of hand sanitizer are on the rise: up 19 percent from a year ago, according to one report. This is not surprising considering the increase in awareness and concern about the current flu season, and this trend is likely to continue as flu activity continues to increase nationwide.

There is no doubt that the use of sanitizers is a good defense against the spread of influenza and other illness-causing microbes. In fact, some health organizations even prefer their use to handwashing. Why? To start with, sanitizers take less time—meaning we are more likely to use them. In addition, many individuals simply don't wash their hands correctly, leaving some germs behind. Further, sanitizers may be less likely to dry out the skin, an important point considering the dry winter months ahead.

However, don't throw away your soap just yet! There are still some very good reasons why soap and water should still be your first defense—especially when food is involved. Hand sanitizers are less effective against viruses and spores like Norovirus and *C. Difficile* that are commonly associated with foodborne illness. In addition, some sanitizer ingredients aren't things that you would like to eat, leading to potential contamination if not used correctly. Also, food preparers frequently have wet hands, or substances on their hands that are high in protein, both of which may decrease the effectiveness of hand sanitizers.

Regarding food safety in the home, washing hands frequently and properly with warm soapy water is still the best option. Keep in mind this means at least 20 seconds of scrubbing, including under the fingernails! Watches and jewelry may make it difficult to get completely clean, so it is best to remove these first. In addition, minimizing hand-to-food contact will help to prevent spread of germs, especially when handling foods that are not going to be further cooked. However, if you are in a situation where soap and water are not available, an alcohol-based sanitizer is certainly your next best choice.

Much of the information in this article was based on the UW-Extension publication entitled 'Coming Clean: Hand Sanitizers and Food Safety in Your Home'. For further information or for the full handout please stop by the Extension office or visit us on the web at <http://www.sheridancounty.com/info/coop/overview.php>. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*