
Readers' Forum

Q. *Should one wash hands until the wrist or the elbows while routinely caring for the sick newborns in a nursery?*

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A. The detailed guidelines of American Academy of Pediatrics for Perinatal Care regarding hand washing should be followed in the Nursery(I). The health personnel entering the nursery for providing baby care should remove any jewellery such as wrist watch, rings and bracelet. The hands and forearms upto elbows should be washed with a soap containing a suitable anti-bacterial detergent for *at least 2 minutes*. Special attention should be paid to thorough washing of finger nails and sides of fingers because pathogens often lurk in these areas. The hands and forearms should be rinsed thoroughly under running water and dried with a sterile disposable paper towel. Due to lack of ready availability of sterile disposable paper towels, electric hand drier or reusable autoclaved mini-towels can be used for drying. The use of a single community towel is condemned. To avoid recontamination after hand washing, the care-taker should refrain from touching the nose, skin, contam-

inated clothing or equipment unrelated to the task. Between handling of infants or after touching the contaminated objects or surfaces, the hands should be washed vigorously again for *at least 15 seconds* with soap and water and dried *vide supra*. Vigorous scrubbing with soap and water for at least 2 minutes eliminates resident flora while 15 seconds of washing with soap and water in-between the handling of infants is desirable to get rid of transient flora. There is a controversy regarding the ideal antibacterial detergent but iodophor detergents and chlorhexidine are effective and can be used for hand washing and surgical scrubs. In India, ethyl-hexadecyl-dimethyl ammonium-ethyl sulfate in propanol (sterilium) is available as an effective alternative for use after hand washing and in-between handling of babies.

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REFERENCE

1. Recommendations from American Academy of Pediatrics and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Infection Control. *In: Guidelines for Perinatal Care*, 3rd edn. Eds. Elk Grove Village, 111., Freeman. R.K. Poland RR. American Academy of Pediatrics, 1992; pp 141-175.