

# Handwashing is Good, But It Can Also Be a Sign of OCD

## Objective

To acknowledge and manage your hand-washing compulsions by learning to wash your hands in a way that is helpful and not hurtful to you.

## You Should Know

Handwashing is widely known as one of the best ways to combat COVID-19 and other illnesses. Thorough handwashing has become a common practice, with many people becoming accustomed to washing their hands multiple times per day. As a result, it can be difficult for people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) to understand what is and is not appropriate hand-washing technique.

Hand-washing compulsions are the most common behaviors of contamination OCD. If you compulsively wash your hands, you will recognize that the obsessive fear surrounding getting or giving an illness, combined with your need for perfection and your uncertainty regarding the cleanliness of your hands, has become a vicious cycle. This might have gotten worse since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hand-washing OCD is characterized by the fear of becoming contaminated by your own actions or the actions of someone else, or the fear of spreading germs to others. It can stem from many sources; these are the most usual:

- Fear of coming close to real things, such as bacteria, viruses, germs, dirt, bodily secretions, hospitals, or people who might be sick.
- Fear of objects that might seem dirty, like pencils, doorknobs, or hand rails.
- Magical thinking about colors, the names of illnesses, numbers, or other things you fear could cause contamination.
- Fear of making yourself or others sick by your carelessness.

Without even being aware of it, you may feel compelled to increase your handwashing to relieve your anxious feelings or fear of getting sick—and before you know it, you are compulsively washing your hands. In fact, many people report they are so consumed by their compulsive handwashing that they are unsure or forget how often “normal” people wash their hands.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states you should wash your hands at these times:

- Before, during, and after preparing food.
- Before eating food.
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick.
- Before and after treating a cut or wound.
- After using the toilet.

- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet.
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- After touching an animal, animal feed, or animal waste.
- After handling pet food or pet treats.
- After touching garbage.
- After spending time in a public place, in an elevator or stairwell, or if you have touched buttons, doorknobs, or railings others have touched.
- After shaking hands with someone.

The CDC guidelines state that hands should be washed with soap and clean water for at least twenty seconds per wash. Each handwashing should take the same amount of time as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice. Use an alcohol-based hand rub that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.

## What to Do

Check off the following statements that apply to you to assess whether you are experiencing hand-washing compulsions.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have disturbing thoughts, images, urges, or sensations I feel can only be eliminated by washing my hands or surfaces I come in contact with.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have a ritual or highly structured hand-washing routine I am compelled to engage in to feel clean. For example, I wash each finger and nail separately.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have to wash my hands a certain number of times in order to feel clean.

\_\_\_\_\_ After I wash my hands, I usually believe I missed a spot.

\_\_\_\_\_ I frequently find myself washing my hands over and over because I experience an overwhelming uncertainty that they are really clean.

\_\_\_\_\_ My hands are red, raw, chapped, or cracked.

\_\_\_\_\_ I avoid places or situations that might expose me to germs.

\_\_\_\_\_ I avoid shaking hands or touching objects that may expose me to germs, dirt, or illness.

\_\_\_\_\_ I cannot control my obsessive thoughts or compulsive acts even though I know they are excessive.

Total you checked off: \_\_\_\_\_

If you checked off three or more statements, you probably compulsively wash your hands.

Next, complete a hand-washing log so you can observe objectively the amount of time you spend washing your hands. Track your handwashing for one week at a time. At the end of each week, total the amount of time you spent washing and the number of times you washed your hands. Add any notes you feel are relevant and important.

Week of: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Days</b>	<b>Total time you spent washing your hands</b>	<b>Total # of times you washed your hands</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Day 1</b>			
<b>Day 2</b>			
<b>Day 3</b>			
<b>Day 4</b>			
<b>Day 5</b>			
<b>Day 6</b>			
<b>Day 7</b>			

What was the most common thought or behavior that triggered your handwashing?

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How do you think your hand-washing behavior impacts your life?

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How does your behavior compare to the CDC guidelines?

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What does this information say to you that encourages you to continue your hand-washing practices? To decrease how much you wash your hands?

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**Reflection on This Exercise**

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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