

What are alcohol hand sanitizers?

Alcohol hand rub, gel or rinse sanitizers are disinfectants containing at least 60 per cent alcohol. Washing hands with warm water and soap is an effective method to remove visible dirt and reduce the number of germs on your hands. However, alcohol hand sanitizers can be used after washing hands with soap and water as an additional agent to kill germs or when soap and water handwashing is not possible. To use these products put an amount the size of your thumbnail in the palm of your hand and carefully rub your hands all over including under your nails. If your hands are visibly soiled, wash your hands using warm water and soap and dry them completely before applying the alcohol hand sanitizer. The alcohol content will completely evaporate in approximately fifteen seconds. Alcohol hand sanitizers are safe for children to use under supervision. Since alcohol has a drying effect many of these products contain emollients to make them gentler on the skin.

Numerous studies have confirmed alcohol hand sanitizers reduce the number of bacteria on the hands of healthcare workers better than washing with soap and water and are as effective or more effective than washing with an antibacterial soap. Alcohol hand sanitizers are also less time consuming and more convenient, which research has shown to lead to improved and sustained hand hygiene initiatives. Also, alcohol hand sanitizers will not contribute to the emergence of microbial resistance because there is no alcohol left behind to promote adaptation. The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently released guidelines for hand hygiene in healthcare settings. The CDC recommends that if hands are not visibly soiled, healthcare workers should use alcohol based rubs between each patient when administering patient care. These recommendations are NOT intended for food service personnel.

Is it safe to handle food after using an alcohol sanitizer?

Using a hand sanitizer before handling food is generally considered safe. In Canada, workers in the food industry are allowed to use alcohol hand sanitizers which have been approved by Health Canada. They are listed by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency as acceptable non-food chemical products. In the food service industry an alcohol hand sanitizer is most helpful as an extra hand disinfection step after washing hands with soap and water.

What should I consider when buying alcohol sanitizers?

Alcohol hand sanitizers are not all the same. A thick gel or foam will prevent dripping and will maximize contact of alcohol and skin during cleaning. The effectiveness of the sanitizer depends on the amount and type of alcohol used. A range of 60 to 70 per cent alcohol is effective in reducing bacteria on the hands. In general, ethanol is better at destroying viruses than isopropanol, however both alcohols are effective at killing bacteria, fungi, and viruses.

Alcohol is flammable at the concentrations found in hand sanitizers. Alcohol hand sanitizers containing high concentrations of ethanol are more flammable than those containing isopropanol or mixtures of ethanol and isopropanol. Alcohol hand sanitizers are classified as hazardous materials and should be stored away from high temperatures or flames.

Information Sources:

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For more information on alcohol hand rubs or other food safety topics, please call the Food Safety Network toll-free at 1-866-50-FSNET or visit our website at www.foodsafetynetwork.ca

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