



## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Hand Washing Boosts Immunity, Brain Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we are talking about the importance of good hand hygiene for protecting our immunity and brain health.***

If there is one positive we can take from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's the increased awareness we have about washing our hands. Good hand hygiene helps protect us and others from infections and illness, including the virus that causes COVID-19 pandemic, but also boosts our immunity and promotes brain health.

It's no surprise that washing our hands helps boost our immune system. Our immune system protects us from the harmful bacteria and pathogens that exist in our world. And while we can't control our immune system, we can help it perform better. One of the best ways to give our immune system a helping hand is through regular hand washing. Washing our hands rinses away germs and stops an infection before it begins.

But research also suggests washing our hands can cleanse our brains. Researchers at the [University of Toronto](https://www.utoronto.ca/) found that the act of hand washing can help us wash away our past experiences and focus on new thoughts and goals. During the study, participants focused on particular goals through word games or a short survey. One group was then asked to evaluate the goals while the other group took a break and used a hand wipe to wash their hands. The group asked to use the wipe was less likely to think about and act on the previous goals and more easily directed to another objective.

With the arrival of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) emphasized repeatedly that hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water are unavailable, is the first line of defense against spreading infection. In addition, the CDC hand washing guidelines recommend rinsing hands well and air-dry for 20 seconds or use a clean towel to dry them.

How important is hand washing when it comes to our health? Just take a look at some of these stats.

- More than 80 percent of communicable diseases are transferred person-to-person through touching.
- We all know it's important to wash our hands after going to the bathroom, yet studies show that less than 75 percent of women and 50 percent of men wash their hands after using the bathroom.
- Most bacteria on our hands are under our fingernails.
- Damp hands are 1,000 times more likely to spread bacteria than dry hands.
- Studies show that people who wash their hands use fewer less sick days because of respiratory illness or stomach viruses.

Most of us touch our faces nearly 20 times an hour, and without proper hand hygiene we run the risk of introducing cold, flu and COVID viruses to our mouths, noses, and eyes. With the cold and flu season upon us, it is important that we remember those hand washing lessons we learned during the pandemic.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

*If you are looking for ways to help boost your immune system, reduce inflammation, and promote brain health, the BHI and [Harvard Health](#) recommend these strategies in addition to hand washing.*

- **Practice good hygiene.** In addition to washing your hands before preparing food and after using the bathroom, you should also cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough. If you don't have a tissue, cough into your elbow rather than your hand. If you have a cut, clean it thoroughly and bandage it to keep it clean. Have any serious cut, or animal or human bite, examined by a doctor.
- **Get vaccinated.** Many serious infections, including COVID-19, can be prevented by immunization. Some people may experience some mild side effects, such as a sore arm or low fever, but vaccines are generally safe and effective. The COVID-19 vaccine is now available to almost everyone and it has been proven to reduce the risk of becoming seriously ill from the virus. Children should receive the recommended childhood vaccinations and adults should make sure their vaccinations are up to date. Travelers should get any necessary additional immunizations.
- **Food safety.** You can prevent most cases of food-borne illness by preparing and storing your foods safely. Make sure you wash your hands with soap and water before and after each time you handle raw food. Meat, poultry, fish, fruits, and vegetables should be rinsed under running water before cooking or serving. Keep raw and cooked foods separate and don't use the same cutting boards and utensils for raw and cooked meat. Cook meat thoroughly the recommended internal temperature. Finally, the safest places to defrost food are the refrigerator and the microwave.

- **Healthy travel.** If you are traveling over the holidays, follow the [CDC guidelines](#) for safe travel.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, **because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).