

UI Extension handwashing class keeps students washing their hands

AT A GLANCE

Teachers report seeing youth washing hands more often and not touching their faces to reduce the spread of germs.

The Situation

Illness is the largest cause of school absences in elementary school students. Schools can be an easy place for germs to pass between students, siblings, families and teachers. Loss of class time hurts student productivity, and sick teachers increase an already stressed teacher and substitute shortage. Proper and frequent handwashing is one of the most effective ways to reduce illness. University of Idaho Extension recognizes this and helps teachers and students stay healthier. There is little time in teachers' busy days, so a short effective lesson was necessary.

Our Response

UI Extension educator Katie McFarland has been teaching a short, 30-minute handwashing lesson in as many classrooms as possible in Lemhi County for over 10 years. Originally, the lessons were taught at the beginning of the school year, but teachers requested to move them later in the school year. The lessons now occur during cold and flu season in January and February when the teachers see more illnesses in their classrooms. They are designed to show youth when washing hands is important, i.e., before eating or after outside play, and how to wash their hands properly. Students use a lotion that fluoresces under a black



McFarland shows preschool students the “germs” simulated by the lotion under the blacklight. Photo by Mellissa Mitchell.

light to simulate germs on their hands and then wash it off using the proper technique taught and practiced in the lesson. The students check their hands' cleanliness by observing how much lotion remains under the black light again. This lesson was taught in 15 classrooms to preschool through fourth-grade students. It was taught in two public elementary schools, two preschool/daycare businesses and two public charter schools.

Program Outcomes

A study was done in 2018 by several UI Extension educators, and it was found that students were washing their hands effectively. After handwashing, there was a significant decrease in germs growing on a petri dish. The lessons continued, and McFarland decided to

check back on the effectiveness and benefit to students and teachers. Teachers were sent a link to an online anonymous survey to share their classroom observations. Five teachers responded to the online survey. Of the teachers surveyed, 100% reported noticing the students keeping their hands away from their eyes, mouth and nose more after the lesson. Four of the five teachers surveyed reported increased handwashing in their classrooms and in students using the proper technique to wash their hands. The students are taught about five specific times to wash their hands. Those times are after going to the bathroom, eating, playing outside, touching a cut or scrape and playing with pets. No teachers observed students after playing with pets. Four of the five teachers surveyed said they noticed their students washing their hands before eating and after touching a cut or scrape. Three of the five teachers reported seeing the students wash their hands after using the bathroom. One teacher marked the answer as non-applicable. Teachers said, “They have increased

their awareness of proper handwashing techniques such as back of the hands and washing long while singing the “ABC” song.” The “ABC” song is the tool educators use to teach the students to wash for at least 20 seconds. Students sing the “ABC” song while washing and don’t finish washing until the song is finished. They also reported, “They were reminding one another to wash their hands” and noticed “A greater awareness of the importance of proper handwashing technique.” The teachers are happy to schedule classes year after year to help the students, and themselves, stay healthy.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Salmon school district 291, South Lemhi School District 292, Upper Carmen Public Charter School, Fern-Waters Public Charter School, Adventure Academy and Kid’s Creek Preschool.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Katie McFarland, Extension Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Lemhi County • 208-742-1698 • khoffman@uidaho.edu

23-23-kmcfarland-handwashing • 7/23