

Patients are too embarrassed to ask doctors if they have washed their hands

- **90 per cent of patients believe healthcare workers should be reminded to wash their hands if they forget**
- **But only 54 per cent would feel comfortable asking doctors to do so**
- **Patients should be 'empowered' to improve the hand hygiene of healthcare workers, say the researchers**

By Anna Hodgekiss

It's one of those nagging questions you never feel comfortable asking – has your doctor washed his or her hands?

Now research has proved many of us are indeed too embarrassed to ask, despite the risk of infection, but says we should be doing so.

The study, from the University of Wisconsin, found most people agree that healthcare workers should be reminded to wash their hands.



Now wash your hands: Patients need to be 'empowered' to improve the hand hygiene of healthcare workers, new research suggests

In the study, more than 200 patients who were at risk for or who had a history of infections with MRSA or Clostridium difficile were quizzed about their views on healthcare-associated infection.

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Good hand hygiene by healthcare workers can help reduce transmission of such infections.

Appropriate hand hygiene includes healthcare workers washing their hands or using an alcohol-based hand rub before and after seeing a patient.

The idea was to determine patient beliefs about hand hygiene of healthcare workers and their willingness to engage healthcare workers in proper hand hygiene behaviours.



Virtually all patients believe hand washing is vitally important, but only 54 per cent would feel comfortable reminding a doctor to do so

The overwhelming majority – 99.5 per cent of patients - believed that healthcare workers were supposed to wash their hands before and after caring for patients.

Most (90 per cent) believed that healthcare workers should be reminded to wash their hands if they forget.

But only 64 per cent and 54 per cent of patients indicated that they would feel comfortable asking nurses or doctors to wash their hands, respectively.

And even fewer patients – just 14 per cent - reported having ever asked a healthcare worker to wash their hands.

Lead researcher Andrew Ottum said: 'Our study shows that patients have a good understanding of the importance of appropriate hand hygiene in the healthcare setting to prevent healthcare-associated infections.

'What is clear is that more should be done to empower patients to feel comfortable asking their healthcare workers to wash their hands. This should be a focus of hand hygiene interventions.'

The study was published in the journal *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology*.

However, research published in the *BMJ* earlier this year reported that thousands of deaths have been prevented in hospitals because medical staff are being more diligent about washing their hands.

It was claimed that the high-profile Clean Your Hands campaign to encourage doctors and nurses to use soap and water or alcohol gel between patients has saved more lives than any medical development for a generation.

Following the launch of the drive in 2004, the amount of soap and alcoholic hand rub bought by NHS trusts almost tripled.