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Give a (clean) hand to sanitizers

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Hands are one of the hardest-working body parts and one of the dirtiest. Though the old adage, "God made dirt, and dirt don't hurt," may be true enough, in this day and age, it's better to be safe than sorry. Germs carried on the hands can transfer many illnesses; cleaning your hands regularly is one of the top five ways listed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for preventing sickness. Clean hands are especially important during the cold and flu season. The CDC reports, "Every year in the United States, on average, 5 percent to 20 percent of the population gets the flu, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications and about 36,000 people die from flu."

But running to the bathroom every 10 minutes to wash up gets tedious. Enter hand sanitizers. These nifty concoctions of germ-killing ingredients are quickly becoming a popular item in schools, offices and homes across the country, and they are proven to work. A study published in the September 2005 issue of *Pediatrics* found that the use of instant hand sanitizers among children in day-care centers reduced the spread of respiratory and gastrointestinal infections by up to 59 percent.

The naturals industry has caught on to this trend, providing consumers with effective hand-sanitizing products that kill germs without harsh chemicals or synthetic ingredients. "People are becoming more aware of the necessity of keeping their hands clean with whole-

some, nurturing products. More and more schools, offices and medical facilities are turning to natural hand sanitizers for their cleansing needs," says Hollie Mulhaupt, chief executive officer of Austin, Texas-based Texas Herbal Body Solutions, maker of all-natural, alcohol-free Lake Palestine hand sanitizer. And the trend is definitely real for Mulhaupt—her sanitizer product has had a sales increase of 50 percent over the last year.

"Hand sanitizers are very important for staying healthy when you're constantly around other people or on the go," says Susan Griffin-Black, co-founder of Corte Madera, Calif.-based EO, a natural personal care company. "But the chemical load found in conventional hand sanitizers makes them not worth it. We stay

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away from artificial colors, fragrances, preservatives and harsh ingredients like sodium laurel sulfate. These ingredients are hard on the skin and body and can be dangerous when used over time."

But are natural hand sanitizers as effective as their conventional counterparts? The answer is a resounding "yes" from the many companies that have come out with hand sanitation products, including gels and wipes, in response to increasing consumer demand for hand-cleansing merchandise. "Our products are just as effective, and in most cases are better for your skin," Griffin-Black says. EO's lavender hand-sanitizing wipes contain an organic alcohol base made from non-GMO corn. "It's our job to make wiser choices and realize the far-reaching effect of each ingredient of every product, not only on ourselves, but on the environment as well," Griffin-Black says.

Interestingly, alcohol, a key ingredient in many companies' hand sanitation product recipes, is the topic of much debate among manufacturers. Griffin-Black argues, "Nothing compares with alcohol for its germ-killing capabilities." Indeed, a study published in the March 2005 issue of *American Journal of Infection Control* found that while washing hands with soap and water was the best way of preventing illness, "alcohol-based hand rubs compared with other products demonstrated better efficacy."

On the other hand, some claim that alcohol-based hand sanitizers are less effective because they are too harsh. "Alcohol actually strips the skin of its natural sebum, which is supposed to protect it. This causes microabrasions in the skin that make it more susceptible to infection," Mulhaupt says. Besides letting more bacteria in, destroying the skin's protective layer also allows for resident bacteria to come to the surface. This increases the likelihood that disease-causing bacteria will be present on the skin, according to Barbara Almanza, a Purdue University professor who teaches sanitation practices for foodservice workers.

Instead of alcohol, therefore, some

natural hand sanitizer manufacturers rely on other substances in the natural world to get hands clean. "Our product starts with a nourishing aloe vera base, and utilizes tea tree and lime essential oils for their antibacterial properties. Tea tree has wonderful germ-stopping qualities," Mulhaupt says. In fact, a June 1999 study published in *Pharmazie* found that Australian tea tree oil had the highest antimicrobial activity when compared with other medicinal oils, including cajuput, niaouli, kanuka, manuka and eucalyptus oils. Researchers for another study, published in the January 2000 issue of *The Journal of Applied Microbiology* state, "The essential oil of *Melaleuca alternifolia* (tea tree) exhibits broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity."

Other companies also rely on tea tree oil's efficacy for their hand sanitation products. Perx Organix has developed a line of three scents of organic hand wipes, each including tea tree oil. "Tea tree oil is the best all-natural antimicrobial agent. It can be used on hands, face and body and won't dry out the skin," says Shawn Glyn, founder of the New York-based company. Besides the main antibacterial component, Perx Organix products contain other ingredients designed to appeal to natural consumers. "Our three scents—lavender, citrus and mint—are all created by organic essential oils. Consumers are really responding to this because they want a way to stay clean and fresh without harming their skin or the environment. People are making more educated purchasing choices," Glyn says.

Another important aspect of the hand sanitation trend is packaging. "People want convenient ways to stay clean on the go," Glyn says. "The naturals industry understands this and is now beginning to provide travel-sized packages, convenient hand wipes and other easy-to-use solutions for consumers." Perx Organix offers its wipes in individually wrapped travel sizes or in an oval canister for home or office use.

The trend is not only that consumers want clean hands, but also that they want to clean their hands with clean products. Luckily, they'll be able to find what they're looking for in your store's aisles. For that, you can give yourself a hand. ■

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