

Public concern about the emergence of antibiotic resistant bacteria has created a perceived need for hand soaps that incorporate antibacterial agents. There is no evidence to suggest that these agents reduce infections in the home. Antibacterial agents alter the mix of naturally occurring bacteria killing susceptible organisms and potentially leaving the organisms resistant to that agent to survive and multiply. Furthermore, the incorporation of low levels of antimicrobial agents, which do not kill the bacteria, may further promote the development of resistance. Apart from concerns of environmental contamination from these agents, most of these products are expensive and play on the public's fears of contracting an infection caused by antibiotic resistant bacteria. In fact, the most common household illnesses are viral in nature, for which antibacterial agents are ineffective. The public's focus should continue to be on frequent hand cleaning with plain soap, safe food preparation, good personal hygiene, and basic home cleanliness.

Antibacterial soap should not be confused with alcohol-based hand rubs which contain ethyl alcohol. They are effective in killing most germs, including bacteria and viruses, on the surfaces of hands. Alcohol-based hand rubs do not contain chemicals that are harmful to the environment and do not promote the development of resistance. These products can be used as an effective alternative to hand washing with plain soap and water as long as hands are not visibly soiled.

Within the healthcare setting, for the most part, plain soap is used for hand cleaning. Antibacterial soap may be considered for use in critical care areas such as intensive care and burn units where patients are highly susceptible to infection. Antibacterial soap is not required and not recommended in other care areas.