Patients Avoid Asking Healthcare Workers To Wash Hands

CHICAGO – According to a new study published online today, most patients at risk for healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) agree that healthcare workers should be reminded to wash their hands, but little more than half would feel comfortable asking their physicians to wash. The study is published in the December issue of Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology, the journal of the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America. The study points to the need for patient empowerment to improve hand hygiene of healthcare workers.

Researchers from the University of Wisconsin designed and administered a questionnaire on awareness of HAIs, including information about hand hygiene, to 200 patients who were at risk for or who had a history of infections with methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) or Clostridium difficile and to patients who were at risk for a central line-associated bloodstream infection or surgical site infection. The survey was administered to determine patient beliefs about hand hygiene of healthcare workers and their willingness to engage healthcare workers in proper hand hygiene behaviors.

Nearly all patients (99.5 percent) believed that healthcare workers were supposed to wash their hands before and after caring for patients. Most (90.5 percent) believed that healthcare workers should be reminded to wash their hands if they forget. However, only 64 percent and 54 percent of patients indicated that they would feel comfortable asking nurses or physicians to wash their hands, respectively. Still fewer patients (14 percent) reported having ever asked a healthcare worker to wash their hands.

"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," said Andrew Ottum, a lead author of the study. "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."

Good hand hygiene by healthcare workers can help reduce transmission of HAIs. Appropriate hand hygiene includes healthcare workers washing their hands or using an alcohol-based hand rub before and after seeing a patient.

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