



## **Your Habits Can Make You Sick—Stop Touching Your Face**

At the end of February, as news was unfolding about the spread of Coronavirus in the United States, public officials throughout the country were advising people to observe basic rules of hygiene, including washing hands frequently with soap and water, avoiding touching your mouth, nose, and eyes, and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces. These all seem like very simple guidelines, and very easy to remember, but people tend to have a disconnect between what they understand and what their habits compel them to do.

This disconnect was illustrated on February 28 during a news conference given by the Santa Clara Public Health Department. One of its officers was listing the basic hygiene rules, including the warning against touching your mouth, nose, and eyes, and then moments later, licked her fingers to turn to a new page of her notes. The irony caused the moment to go “viral” online, with many finding it amusing, although the reality is that many of those laughing are also likely to touch their faces unwittingly, as it is a common habit which many people are unaware they have. Social media was soon brimming with video clips of public figures repeating the warning against face touching and then . . . touching their faces.

Studies have shown that people touch their faces over 20 times per hour on average, with nearly half of that touching including contact with the eyes, mouth, and nose. These areas contain mucous membranes, which are a vulnerable entry point through which viruses find the easiest pathway into the body. Even hands which seem clean have usually touched numerous objects every hour, including objects like doorknobs or handrails which may have been touched by dozens of other people.

In an interview with The Seattle Times, Dr. William Sawyer stated that avoiding touching your facial mucous membranes is an extremely important measure for preventing infections: “It’s the one behavior that would be better than any vaccine ever created.” Dr. Sawyer added that people are more likely to become infected by viruses from touching an infected surface and then touching their faces than from inhaling droplets from an infected person’s cough, sneeze, or exhalation.

This revelation should be empowering, since not touching your face is within your control, whereas not breathing something you can’t see—or even know when to expect—is largely outside of your control. But face touching is an almost involuntary habit that people have learned over a lifetime. One of the several studies of face touching concluded, “Spontaneous facial self-touch gestures are performed manifold every day by every human being, primarily in stressful situations.” Despite the revelation being seen as good news by those few who don’t touch their faces, it caused a new revelation for most people as to how often they touch their faces without thinking about it. The video of the Santa Clara official licking her fingers going viral was soon followed by dozens of Twitter users sharing, as actor Seth Rogen remarked, “Realizing basically all I do is touch my face.”

Habits are constructed and reinforced over decades, and they are part of what makes the human mind capable of feats of agility, grace, artistry, and athleticism. They are what make it possible for musicians

to translate a musical idea into intricate finger movements that produce a flurry of notes in the space of an instant. But they also make it difficult to stop doing things that are not helpful or productive. Habits made deliberately or unwittingly are equally difficult to break. Habits achieve this by becoming reflexive, thereby bypassing the decision-making process. Eliminating a bad habit requires that the habit be brought to your awareness before it is followed. For example, smokers can stuff objects into their packs of cigarettes that cause them to pause their normal routine when reaching for a cigarette. Unfortunately, the face is not so easily modified to prevent touching it.

Some suggestions for breaking the face-touching habit include identifying the triggers that cause you to touch your face. If dry eyes cause you to rub them, you may want to consider moisturizing drops as an alternative. Similarly, if an itchy nose causes you to touch your nose, try to keep tissues handy and use those to touch your face instead of your bare fingers. If awareness of the triggers is maintained, then the new response can be used to replace the old habit. Noticing what triggers a compulsive behavior and then substituting it with a different behavior is one of the most effective ways to break an unwanted habit.

Other suggestions that may be effective at curbing compulsive behavior include keeping your hands occupied with a stress ball, rubber band, or other object, or by lacing your fingers together and placing your hands on your lap. Some people use Post-it notes placed throughout their home or workspace to remind them of behaviors they are trying to change. Similarly, a small mirror could be placed on a desktop to help increase awareness of when you may be touching your face.

While these suggestions may be effective for some, others may find that they still touch their face with one hand while the other squeezes a stress ball, or that they can't maintain a professional demeanor with a stress ball making them appear "fidgety". Notes and mirrors can easily be ignored while attending to other things, so some will find those methods of habit-breaking less effective as well. (Periodic phone reminders may be more effective, but may also be too intrusive for some.)

Methods that directly disrupt the unwanted behavior are ideal. While many reports in media debate whether disposable face masks are effective against airborne viruses, it is acknowledged that they are very effective at preventing people from touching their mouths and noses—when worn properly. Likewise, glasses can help prevent people from rubbing their eyes, so contact lens wearers who want to avoid rubbing their eyes could consider glasses as a possible preventative measure. Glasses are less obtrusive than a mask, and certainly won't prevent every attempt of fingers to touch the eyes, but they may increase awareness of the habit, which can be helpful in changing behavior.

Another suggestion for preventing face touching is the use of scented soaps, lotions, or even perfumes or essential oils on the hands. When you bring your hands to your face, the smell could spark awareness of habitual behavior to help you stop or replace that behavior.

Another helpful resource for vigilance against unwanted behaviors that is overlooked is our friends, family, and peers. The people around you in your day-to-day life can be a huge source of support and reinforcement when making changes of nearly any kind. The reminder of another person that you are slipping back into an unwanted habit can be a great motivator to commit to making a change. Aside from being made aware of habitual behavior when you do it, there is also the underlying knowledge that your friends are watching you and holding you accountable to your own goal to change that behavior.

They can also provide you with feedback as they observe your progress in changing your behavior over time.

Considering that stress is also something that should be avoided when trying to stay healthy, the active support of friends, family, or peers when trying to make a change that can be difficult or frustrating can be invaluable.

**Resources:**

Washington State Department of Health Coronavirus news –  
<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus>

Center for Disease Control “What You Should Know” Coronavirus information –  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html>

Center for Disease Control Guidance for Businesses: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-business-response.html>

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – [https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/pandemic\\_flu.html](https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/pandemic_flu.html)