



Germ City Makes Handwashing Fun

In May of 2012, Alaska's Food Safety & Sanitation program began working on a project named "Germ City," which is intended to physically illustrate the importance that handwashing plays in lowering the frequency of foodborne illness. Working in collaboration with the Alaska Food Safety Advisory Committee (AFSAC), University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension, Washington State University Cooperative Extension and Fred Meyer® Stores, Germ City will debut in August at the Tanana Valley State Fair, and then be used at the Governor's Picnic in Anchorage.

The Germ City Hand Washing Program is an interactive, science-based program that increases awareness of risk of poor hand hygiene and its relationship to food-borne illness while improving the effectiveness and frequency of handwashing. It is designed for use with all ages, with a special emphasis on young children age three and up. Germ City works by changing the mundane task of handwashing into an extravaganza of hands-on special effects to demonstrate the efficiency of hand washing in controlling the spread of "germs" responsible for foodborne illnesses.



The physical Germ City unit resembles a rectangular tent. It has an aluminum frame that measures 7' x 7' x 3.5' and is covered by black lightproof fabric that opens at each end for an entry and exit. Inside, it is equipped with two black lights, a cityscape on the wall and posters illustrating "how to wash your hands" and "when to wash your hands." Users can create other specific visuals as per their imagination, from brightly colored streamers hanging down to bubbles floating up to add motion and intensity. At the exit end, there needs to be a portable handwashing station. Waterless hand sanitizer and sterile hand wipes can also be used if necessary or for specific comparisons in efficacy.

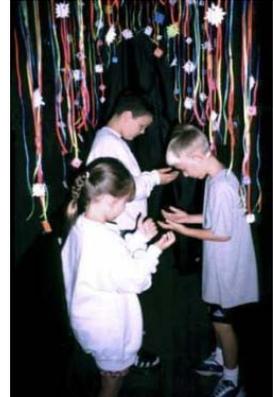
Germ City is a hands-on educational activity. Children (and adults) enter Germ City at one end of the unit. They encounter a brilliantly colored interior that only black lights can produce. Upbeat music (including modified popular songs altered to include food safety lyrics) plays in the background. A very small dab of non-toxic lotion is placed in the palm of one hand, and the kids are asked to rub their hands together to spread the lotion around. The lotion glows under black lights, and represents germs (pathogenic bacteria) that need to be washed away. The children are then asked to exit to the handwashing station and challenged to wash all the germs off their hands and come back to check how well they washed. When they come back into Germ City to check how well they washed, the black lights usually reveal glowing germs around the fingernails and between fingers. Everyone in Germ City sees the glowing residue,



and that acts as a teaching tool for those just leaving to wash their hands. The children are asked to wash their hands again until all the glowing is gone. (At that time, a small prize can be given for demonstrating handwashing excellence!)

There are additional exercises that illustrate how quickly and easily germs pass to objects and other people: touching the same area, shaking hands, handling a fake pet, etc. The effect can be increased by switching from regular light to black light.

While Germ City is fun for kids, it also teaches them a specific lesson about handwashing; it's important to wash thoroughly even when their hands look clean. According to the Centers for Disease Control, handwashing is the single most important barrier to the spread of foodborne disease. Most Americans underestimate the potential seriousness of foodborne illness and its correlation with handwashing practices. There is a clear need to communicate risk and enhance consumer motivation for handwashing and personal hygiene that makes lasting behavior change possible. This is what Germ City does. And it produces measurable results.



Several (non-scientific) reports compiled from follow-up self-evaluating surveys indicate positive results in handwashing behavior changes in frequency and duration.

These reports are available at <http://www.reeis.usda.gov/web/crisprojectpages/0190520-the-germ-city-hand-washing-program-clean-hands-healthy-people.html>

For more information on Germ City, including scheduling and reservations for your area, please contact Randy Pfeuffer at 907-376-1845 or randall.pfeuffer@alaska.gov

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