

Consumer Handwashing Research: Handwashing in a Pandemic

Research programme [Research projects -](#)

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Background

Between April 2020 and January 2021, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) with Ipsos MORI collected data on handwashing to understand how and why people wash their hands and the impact the pandemic has had on their handwashing behaviour. This report combines the findings from the qualitative and quantitative research conducted by the FSA alongside other literature available on the topic of hand hygiene to provide a comprehensive overview of consumer handwashing behaviour during the pandemic.

Key findings

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant changes in consumer's usual handwashing habits, particularly an increase in the amount of time spent handwashing, the thoroughness of handwashing and the scenarios in which participants wash their hands or use hand sanitising gel.

This research shows that consumers are knowledgeable about effective hand hygiene techniques; participants knew that handwashing should last for at least 20 seconds, should use a thorough technique, should use soap, warm water, and a clean towel. This knowledge was aided by the recent handwashing media campaigns related to the pandemic.

During the pandemic, participants considered their home to be a 'safe space' which led them to believe that it was not necessary to wash their hands as regularly. In contrast, outside of the home in settings once considered 'safe' (such as supermarkets, restaurants/cafes, and the workplace) had become places where people felt at risk of contracting COVID-19. Many participants had developed a new routine of carrying hand sanitiser when outside the home to ensure they could carry out hand hygiene in places where handwashing facilities were unavailable.

Our research provides evidence that consumer handwashing behaviours are influenced by family, friends, educational settings, and cultural background. When handwashing behaviours become habitual, they stay with consumers for long periods of time. The COVID-19 pandemic, becoming a parent and working with children were all 'moments of change' for participants, allowing the potential for new habits to be created, particularly with influence from the media and other training and education.

Inaccessible, unhygienic, and crowded facilities were all barriers to good hand hygiene, whilst the presence of hand sanitiser stations (e.g. when entering shops) improved hand hygiene

Participants showed good adherence to handwashing whilst preparing food, particularly to avoid cross-contamination from raw meat, fish, and eggs and due to a fear of food poisoning. However, hand hygiene behaviours could be improved in some scenarios, particularly after handling dry rubbish, before eating, after handling and feeding pets and after coughing and sneezing.

The quarterly handwashing tracker will continue until January 2022 (a total of eight survey waves). This ongoing monitoring will help to determine if any observed changes in handwashing behaviours are sustained as the pandemic subsides.

Research report

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