

Personal Hygiene: Attributes to a Healthy Body and Mind

By Dr. Lalitha Kanapathi

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “HYGIENE” as “conditions and practices that helps maintain health and prevent the spread of diseases”. As the term suggest, it is cleanliness that is maintained in ourselves and that helps to benefit our own and other’s well-being. Everyone has their own routines and set benchmarks by what has been passed down to them by the elders in the family when it comes to keeping oneself clear of dust and germs, usually a cultural trend at their own homes. Cultivating personal hygienic measures helps reduce the rates of infections, prevents illness and maintains general well-being.

How cleanliness and hygiene differs? Or are they synonymous? Cleanliness is a common word used quite lavishly in daily conversations to describe the process of cleaning, but hygiene equates to the end result of cleanliness. Cleanliness does not replace hygiene. But, cleanliness is necessary to attain hygienic conditions. Cleanliness can clear away any unwanted material from the surface of an object or floors through certain cleaning activities, such as using detergent and wet cloth to wipe off dirt, mopping floors or vacuum cleaning. Do these cleaning processes ensure hygienic conditions? Hygiene is the process of cleaning and preventing the spread of any microorganisms. So, cleanliness may not necessarily lead to hygienic conditions. This premise is extensively promoted by sanitizer commercials where the adverts emphasizes on the ability to rid off microorganisms effectively. The use of microscopic view of hands of pre- and post-sanitization in these adverts, in a way, defines the underlying differences between cleanliness and hygiene.

We can reflect on the primordial years to understand some instances of endeavors towards personal hygiene. Early personal hygiene pinpoints to two customary mainstay, washing hands and bathing. At that time, cleanliness is hygiene. However, this changed as they started using minerals or herbal produce to cleanse themselves of “dirt”, besides seeking a radiant appearance. Tracing back to the 6th century, “dirt” was recognized as “germs” that needs to be removed off the skin. This brought about the advent of large bathing pools introduced by the Greeks and soon after by the Romans. There were evidences of soap like products that were found in clay bowls and a mixture of copper and lead ore used for local application on skin for a change in tone and clarity. Other substances, include clay, sand, pumice, chalk and ashes, were also used as face powder. An epidemic of Cholera in the 19th century brought about the discovery of vinegar which was used on contaminated water pumps, sinks and pools. Vinegar was used as a disinfectant. It was widely used for dusting, polishing, fowl odors, polishing, washing clothes and linens and to wash hands.

Today at the mention of personal hygiene, aside from washing hands, other select few comes to mind. These are brushing teeth and flossing, taking a shower, washing hair, washing face, cleaning the eyes, covering nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing and sneezing, taking note of body odour, bad breath, keeping nails trimmed and clean and dressing up in clean, pressed and neat attires. Oops.....not forgetting washing those dirty socks and wearing those glistening shoes. That’s a whole list of what I would call tedious list of chores to accomplish every day. Though it may seem daunting, these personal hygiene regime should, faithfully, be entrenched into everyone’s awfully hectic lifestyle.

A personal hygiene regime may require two sets of activities. One is to keep one’s environment clean and the other is to keep one’s physiological self immaculate.

Microorganisms are present all over our homes and surroundings, invisible to the naked eyes. Some may be harmful to us. These are “germs”. Otherwise known as bacteria, virus or fungus. However, some may not be as harmful and escapes untouched. Resorting to a thought that a monotonously well kept surrounding with a routine chore would resolve the “germs“ and “dusty” environment, may not necessarily mean a hygienic home and environment. The surface of our skin or any cuts and wounds is susceptible to infections as it comes into contact with other surfaces in the environment. For example, we are physically in contact with door knobs, handles, counter surfaces, utensils, sink, faucets, taps, tables, wallets, handbags and many more. At home or offices, we constantly touch railings, stairways, bar handles, poles, toilets seats and probably, pets. Irrespective of where and when, it is imperative that we always keep a note on hand hygiene.

“Environmental Hygiene” aside from a clean environment, denotes one’s principles and values on personal hygiene and this extends to cultural beliefs on hygiene. Very often, cultural beliefs are based on historical approaches that doesn’t always blend in with today’s hygienic practices. To name a few, most Asians tend to leave their shoes at their doorstep and change to a pair of home flip flops or enter barefoot to traipse across a clean hallway. In rural villages in Africa, similarly in India and many other countries, clean water was traditionally fetched from the river as homes do not have running tap water, usually fetched in clay pots and balanced on the head or two pots on either sides using a bamboo pole and balanced on shoulders. Two or more pots so that there is sufficient water to cook, wash, drink, bathe and clean their homes. If required these routines are repeated several times a day. In America and Europe, bathing was not given importance due to cold climatic conditions. Where as, in the tropical regions, a bath is considered a necessity again due to the humid weather in this part of the world. In India, cow dung is used as an insect repellent and disinfectant. During the period of

industrialization and socio-economic growth, waste materials began to accumulate near river beds thus gradually contaminating drinking water from rivers which gave rise to emergence of water borne diseases like Cholera, Typhoid and Dysentery, and airborne transmissions like Tuberculosis, Pneumonia, Influenza, exacerbation of Asthma and Common cold, also known as hay fever. An individual who has a bout of cough and cold can transmit his or her symptoms with a “hand shake”! Other vectors are through saliva, sweat, blood, etc.

By taking a few simple steps to an improved hygienic measure, what results is an admirable outcome. Indirect measures include driving less to reduce fuel combustion that contributes to pollution, reduce use of chemical compounds and pesticides, recycling of materials, dispose waste materials in the proper manner, reduce use of contaminants, refuse single use items like straws, plastic cutleries and plastic containers that’s accumulating in your kitchen drawers and cabinets, practice 4Rs (Reuse, Reduce, Recycle and Refuse) and compost if possible. Clear away accumulated rain water at the base of your flower pots and clear away clogged drains. Bring a reusable bag to your grocers, bring in your own food carrier when you are buying out. Getting involved in community cleaning activities would further enhance cleaner surroundings.

This, eventually, prevent loss of work productivity, reduces sick days at work or school and gives a sense of belonging and of owning a clean home, sense of pride of being in a clean environment and in turn resulting in good general health and well-being.

It is not so much of that obsession with cleanliness, tidying and being neat that is important. What matters, is the routine and discipline of getting it done every day.

It is useful to make quick note of some useful tips on the practice of personal hygiene at home and outside home. Integrating these simple practices along with the usual routines attributes to a healthy body and mind.

An unsatisfactory personal hygiene may affect a friendship, a relationship amongst family members and may even deter the opportunities to a pending promotion or pending interviews.

Going that extra mile to care for oneself is definitely not a waste of time or energy and is important to one's self esteem.

Dr. Lalitha Kanapathi is a medical practitioner and writes articles as a hobby. Her writing interest encompasses on cultivating good habits to facilitate a healthy body and mind, especially among students. She can be contacted at lkanapathi11@gmail.com.