

PRIMIT - Web Programme Encourages Hand Washing



A randomised trial of more than 16,000 households in the UK used a web-based programme to encourage more frequent hand washing and found that it reduces the risk of catching and passing on respiratory tract infections to other household members. The research has been published in *The Lancet*.

The programme called PRIMIT also showed that users of the programme had fewer gastrointestinal infections, a lower demand for consultations with their doctors, and fewer antibiotic prescriptions.

“Our findings suggest that a simple, cheap internet programme to encourage handwashing can reduce the risk of infection by around 14 per cent. Because most of the population catches coughs, colds, sore throats and other respiratory infections, this could have an important impact on reducing the spread of these viruses in the general population, and also help reduce the pressure on NHS services during the winter months,” explains lead author Professor Paul Little from the University of Southampton in the UK.

PRIMIT is a free-to-access, interactive, web-based programme. Four weekly sessions encourage users to learn some simple techniques through which they can avoid catching and passing on viruses. The programme also monitors hand washing behaviour as well as provide tailored feedback.

20,066 individuals aged 18 years and older from 344 general practices across the UK were enrolled in the study. Participants were randomly assigned access to the PRIMIT website or no intervention and were followed for 16 weeks. The researchers used questionnaires to measure episodes of respiratory infections, duration of symptoms, and to check whether other household members had a similar illness.

The results showed that 51 percent of individuals in the PRIMIT group reported at least one respiratory infection as compared to 59 percent in the control group. Risk of catching a flu-like illness was around 20 per cent lower in the PRIMIT group as compared to the control group, and need for primary care consultations and antibiotic prescriptions were also reduced by 10–15 per cent in the PRIMIT group.

Professor Little highlights the fact that a programme like PRIMIT could play an important role in reducing the spread of flu and would cost very little to the healthcare system. In addition, Professor Chris van Weel from Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands and Australian National University, Canberra, Australia points out that the intervention has broad applicability and shows improved management of infections with fewer antibiotics which could be an important benefit considering the growing problem of antibiotic resistance.

Source: University of Southampton
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