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Washers, Rinsers and Walkers: A Case for Hand Washing

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How many times a day do you wash your hands? And when?

If you're not sure, there just might be someone else at your job keeping tabs on your workplace hygiene.

Chicago-area writer Ryan Klos shares his thoughts on rinsers, washers and walkers.

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It's flu season and according to WebMD magazine, "95 percent of people say they wash their hands after using the bathroom, but only 67 percent really do it. Worse, only 33 percent bother to use soap." This doesn't surprise me, but I think that last number is exaggerated. According to my current list at work, washers are more likely around 28 percent. I've got a spreadsheet keeping track of who falls into which category. It's broken into three columns: washers, rinsers and walkers.

The washer is legitimately concerned with cleanliness and killing germs. He washes his hands after each bathroom break despite the dryness and cracking in the dry winter months. Ten to fifteen washes per day is not unusual.

The rinser quickly runs his hands under the water enough to get his fingers wet and is walking out the door before the water has swirled down the drain. He often carries a paper towel out with him. This is for show. The rinser wants people to see that he's conscientious and clean, but, if no one else is in the bathroom, he will likely become a walker. And for the amount of germs he's still harboring, he may as well be one.

The walker has no regard for cleanliness, thinks he's above bathroom germs, is always in too much of a hurry to wash. When he's finished his business, he flushes, then heads for the door pushing the handle in the most common spot. He has successfully deposited, and picked up, several other walkers' germs and transferred more from the flusher to the door. In a few moments he'll be back at his desk typing on his keyboard, clicking his mouse, or God forbid, biting his nails.

Everyone is on The List whether they know it or not. See, people notice what you do in the bathroom—and what you don't. Your co-workers are keeping track. Where I work, we've got over seventy people on our list. A group of five of us update the spreadsheet and get reports from all departments about who falls in which column.

You'd be surprised at the status of some of the people on the list, others you'd expect. For instance, last week someone came to my cube in an excited panic, looked both ways before speaking, then leaned in, his voice low and serious, "I just saw Stephens, the CEO...he's a walker." I thanked him for his information, although it wasn't new to me.

Washers are definitely the minority, and having observed the behaviors of rinsers and walkers, I cannot understand their hurry to leave the bathroom. It might only take another minute, maybe two at the long end, to use soap, work up a bubbly lather, scrub and rinse. What's 120 seconds? Perhaps it means not having to wait for the next elevator. Maybe it means having lunch 120 seconds sooner. But isn't that its own case for washing?

The worst thing about the rinsers and walkers: they are among you. They stop by your cube when you're not there and use your pen to jot a note on your Post-It pad. They use the same coffee pot,


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the same refrigerator handle, the same drinking fountain, the same vending machine buttons. They are depositing their bacteria and germs openly and freely, shaking hands and clapping shoulders.

Don't be surprised, rinsers and walkers, if you're denied a friendly handshake or stared at in the halls at work. We know who you are. You're on The List, and we know which column you're in.

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