

hand soap

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Hand Soap

Liquid or bar cleanser for the hands — the most-used cosmetic in most households, and the subject of the clearest piece of consumer-protection rulemaking FDA has done in this whole catalogue.

Plain soap wins

FDA's 2016 final rule banned nineteen active ingredients — triclosan and triclocarban among them — from consumer antiseptic wash products, on the ground that manufacturers had not demonstrated they were **safe for long-term daily use** or **more effective than plain soap and water** at preventing illness.

That is the settled position and it is worth stating plainly: for domestic handwashing, **plain soap and water is the recommendation**, and antibacterial hand soap offers no demonstrated benefit over it while contributing to antimicrobial resistance concerns and to environmental persistence.

Healthcare antiseptics and hand sanitisers are separate categories with separate rules and genuine uses.

The technique that actually matters

Handwashing effectiveness is dominated by **mechanics, not chemistry**. Surfactant lifts soil and microbes; **running water carries them away**. The published guidance:

1. **Wet, apply soap, lather.**
2. **Scrub for at least 20 seconds**, including the backs of the hands, between the fingers, the thumbs, the fingertips and under the nails. Fingertips and thumbs are the most commonly missed.
3. **Rinse under running water.**
4. **Dry thoroughly.** Wet hands transfer microbes far more readily than dry ones, so drying is part of the process rather than an afterthought.

Water temperature makes no meaningful difference to microbial removal at any temperature comfortable to the hands — hot water strips lipids and damages skin without improving the wash.

Hand dermatitis

The cost of frequent washing, and the reason it matters: repeated surfactant exposure strips the barrier, and **occupational hand dermatitis is one of the most common work-related skin diseases** in healthcare, catering, cleaning and childcare.

The management, which surprises people: **alcohol-based hand sanitiser is gentler on the skin barrier than soap and water** when hands are not visibly soiled, because it does not emulsify and remove the skin's own lipids, and modern formulations contain emollients. Alternate the two, use lukewarm water, and apply a [Hand Cream](#) after every wash.

Foaming versus liquid versus bar

Foaming pumps dispense a dilute solution aerated at the nozzle — typically a fraction of the surfactant of an equivalent volume of liquid. That is efficient rather than inferior, and it uses less product per wash. Do not refill a foaming dispenser with undiluted liquid soap; it will clog and it defeats the design.

Bars are not a hygiene problem. Studies have not found meaningful transfer of pathogens from shared bar soap to hands under normal use — but a bar sitting in standing water is unpleasant and wasteful, so a draining dish matters.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category **(12) personal cleanliness** — for a plain liquid hand soap, which is a synthetic detergent system. A **true soap bar sold only as soap is not a cosmetic at all**; see [Bar Soap](#). Any **antibacterial claim makes it an OTC drug**, subject to the 2016 rule above.

In the EU, preservatives come from the **Annex V closed positive list** of 60 entries, **methylisothiazolinone is capped at 15 ppm in rinse-off products**, and named fragrance allergens must be declared above 0.01% in rinse-off — a list substantially expanded by Regulation (EU) 2023/1545.

Shelf life

Two to three years unopened; 12–18 months after opening.

The specific failure in this category is the **refill habit**: topping up a pump bottle without washing and drying

it, or diluting the last of it with water. Both introduce contamination into a bottle that is then touched by dirty hands many times a day. Wash and dry the dispenser between refills, or replace it.

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- [Hand Cream](#) — the necessary other half.
- [household consumer items](#) — the shopping side.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.