

Dirty hands are wreaking havoc among Kenyans

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Your hands are a fertile ground for bacteria that find their way into your mouth, hygiene experts warned on Thursday.

And with **nine in every 10 Kenyans not washing their hands with soap**, public health officials are concerned that the habit has become entrenched in Kenyan culture.

Studies show that **few Kenyans wash their hands after visiting the toilet or changing a baby's diapers**. Public Health director Shanaaz Shariff said access to soap was not the reason for this laxity as the culture cuts across social and economic groups.

Households that have hand-washing soap show a 45 per cent lower incidence of diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections, Dr Shariff said.

He was speaking at the launch of a campaign dubbed the Alliance for the Promotion of Hand Washing with Soap at Nairobi's Hotel Intercontinental on Thursday.

The national hand washing steering committee says the failure to wash hands with soap is deeply rooted despite the fact that 97 per cent of Kenyan households have access to some kind of soap.

Diseases related to dirty hands kill a child every 15 seconds in the world.

The chairman of the Alliance for Promotion of Hand Washing with Soap, Prof James Jowi, said washing entails wetting hands with water and applying soap.

Hands must be dried with a paper towel or dryer. If possible, use paper towel to turn off the tap to avoid re-infection, he said.

Dr Mohammed Karama, a Kemri researcher, said washing hands protects against cholera, typhoid, diarrhoea, worms, parasitic infections, food poisoning, and flu.

A 2008 study found that less than two per cent of people washed their hands in six of the eight districts studied.

Only Mombasa (13 per cent), Nyeri (12 per cent), and Machakos (four per cent) had high rates. Nyeri was said to have easy access to water while in Mombasa, religion defined the practice. The study does not mention the level in Nairobi.

Children should be discouraged from playing with coins or popping them into their mouths as they contain diarrhoea-causing cryptosporidium parasites.