

# CAN A LITTLE DIRT HURT?

For two years now we've had good reason to be germophobes. But our kids can't live in a bubble — nor should they.

**In an era of** hand sanitizers on demand and antibacterial soap at every turn, many physicians are promoting a shift in personal hygiene that may surprise you—especially when it comes to kids. These docs have unexpected praise for a nasty old four-letter word: dirt.

“Exposure to dirt and bacteria can be very beneficial for your child,” says Mohammad Younus, M.D., pediatric and adult allergy and immunology specialist at Hackensack Meridian Health affiliated with Hackensack University Medical Center. “It’s fine to wash hands with warm water and soap during the flu and pandemic. But if they’re playing outside or playing with a dog or cat, it’s OK if they put their hands in their mouths.”

The doctor says this is because when young children are initially exposed to germs or viruses, their immune systems make specific antibodies to help recognize the pathogens faster with re-exposure, therefore

helping to fight them off more effectively in the future. In fact, he cites a study published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* that shows that infants who during their first year lived in homes with mouse and cat dander and (yuck!) cockroach droppings—exposure to which can make asthma symptoms worse—had lower-than-average rates of wheezing at age 3.

Instead of avoiding all germs all the time, says Dr. Younus, letting your kids be exposed to everyday germs is essential for normal development of the immune system. “We should allow kids to explore and experience the world and encourage them to play outdoors and get dirty.”

Healthy children exposed to certain germs may come down with a cough, an upset stomach or even a cold, for example. “But that exposure helps to train their immune system to be more protective the next time they get

sick,” Dr. Younus says.

The timing of exposure is also important. Though it seems counterintuitive, research shows that the younger the child, the better. “Scientific pathways as to why this happens remain unclear,” says Dr. Younus, “but a 2012 study suggests that young mice exposed to different types of bacteria were less likely to develop inflammatory conditions like colitis and asthma than the mice who weren’t exposed.”

Research on children who grow up on farms—and are exposed to microorganisms in the soil—also shows they’re less likely to have asthma and allergies. Likewise, city-dwelling infants exposed to high levels of pollution and allergens actually seem to benefit from them. “You don’t have to rush and wash your children’s hands each time they get dirty,” Dr. Younus says. “It’s important for kids to practice good hygiene, but we don’t need to take it too far.”

## WHEN TO CLEAN, AND HOW?

Not only is a little dirt on a kid’s hands not a big deal, it can actually be helpful, says Mohammad Younus, M.D., a pediatric and adult allergy and immunology specialist in Hackensack affiliated with Hackensack University Medical Center. Here are some guidelines:

- In the backyard sandbox, let kids play, he says. But keep the box covered so it doesn’t become a cat’s litter box.
- On the ballfield or gym floor, it’s OK to get dirty. But “we should encourage healthy eating habits in addition to letting kids get dirty through play,” says the doctor.
- Always wash your hands diligently, especially if you’re sick. “Wash with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds,” Dr. Younus advises.
- When you clean off dirt and germs from surfaces around your home, take care. “If you’re using a surface cleaner that contains chemicals, I recommend wearing gloves because repeated use can be irritating to the skin, especially for those with sensitive skin or eczema.” He adds: “And let it dry before letting your child touch it.”
- Avoid using air sanitizers, especially if your child is asthma-prone. “Fumigating is not necessary or recommended,” he adds, “because it can cause irritation to the eyes, nose and throat.”