

Bare Below the Elbows guideline

Version 2.0

Key Messages

- A Bare Below the Elbows approach is encouraged to improve the effectiveness of hand hygiene for staff who have direct contact with the patient or healthcare environment.
- The effectiveness of hand hygiene is also improved when skin is intact, fingernails are natural, short, and unvarnished, hands and forearms are free from jewellery, and sleeves are short or rolled to the elbow.
- A process to monitor compliance is also encouraged.

Purpose

This guideline provides recommended actions for staff delivering patient care to comply with the Bare Below the Elbows approach. Effective hand hygiene is a fundamental infection prevention and control strategy in healthcare settings to prevent the transmission of microorganisms between the patient, healthcare worker, and environment to enhance patient safety.¹⁻³ Bare Below the Elbows enables healthcare workers to decontaminate their hands correctly to improve the effectiveness of hand hygiene.²

Scope

This guideline provides instruction for all Queensland Health employees (permanent, temporary, and casual) and all organisations and individuals acting as its agents (including Visiting Medical Officers and other partners, contractors, consultants, students, and volunteers) and all Queensland licensed private health facilities. The information found in this guideline may also be used by other health and residential care services. Human Rights have been considered in the formation of these guidelines.

Guideline for Bare Below the Elbows

Healthcare workers should perform hand hygiene in accordance with the [National Hand Hygiene Initiative](#).²

A Bare Below the Elbows approach is encouraged to improve the effectiveness of hand hygiene.³ The World Health Organization recommends that long sleeves are avoided by healthcare workers.⁴ The effectiveness of hand hygiene is also improved when skin is intact, fingernails are natural, short and unvarnished, hands and forearms are free from jewellery and sleeves are above the elbow.^{4,5,6}

Staff having direct contact with patients or a patient's environment should observe the following:

- Bracelets, wrist watches, and rings should not be worn.^{3,4,6}
- A significant ring such as a single flat ring or band, with no stones⁵ may be acceptable but should not interfere with effective hand hygiene practice. Wearing of plain bands in higher risk settings such as operating theatres is not permitted.^{3,4}
- Long sleeves are discouraged.^{4,5} If worn, sleeves should be rolled or pushed up above the elbow when giving direct patient care or in the patient environment so as not to interfere with effective hand hygiene.²
- Fingernails should be natural, kept short and clean, and nail polish should not be worn. Artificial or embellished nails should not be worn.^{4,6}
- Any skin integrity breaches (abrasions, cuts, or dermatitis) should be covered with waterproof film dressing. Staff with dermatitis should report for evaluation as per local procedures.²⁻³
- Remove protruding piercings and body modification jewellery/items positioned from the elbow to the fingertips as they impede effective hand hygiene (including but not limited to piercings or other body modifications, resulting in non-intact skin from the elbow to the fingertips).^{7,8}
- Long ties and lanyards are not recommended. Retractable (or similar) ID card holders are recommended in place of lanyards and should be cleaned regularly. If ties are worn, they should be tucked in or secured.³
- Guidance from staff line manager or local infection prevention and control service should be sought for any staff with casts or compression garments below the elbows prior to patient contact.
- Bare Below the Elbows compliance auditing may support a facility's Infection Control Management Plan and provide evidence of meeting Action 3.10: Hand Hygiene of the Australian Commission Safety and Quality in Health Care Standards

Related documents

- [Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare](#)
- [National Hand Hygiene Initiative Implementation Guide](#)
- [WHO guidelines on hand hygiene in health care](#)
- [Bare Below the Elbows factsheet](#)
- [Bare Below the Elbows Compliance Audit](#)
- [Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 - Queensland Legislation](#)
- [Human Rights Act 2019 - Queensland Legislation](#)

References

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Approval and implementation

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Version control

Version	Date	Prepared by	Comments
1.0	4 October 2017	Communicable Diseases Branch	New guideline published following rescinding of Department of Health Guideline for Hand Hygiene and following consultation.
2.0	24 November 2023	Communicable Diseases Branch	Updated references. Minor changes to wording. Human Rights 2019-Qld assessment undertaken.