

Joseph Lister

Joseph Lister was a surgeon in England in the 1800s. He helped popularize the idea that sanitation and cleanliness are just as important to health care as good doctors are.

In the 1800s, going to the doctor was almost as risky as not seeing one at all. Though other doctors and scientists had proven that hand-washing helps prevent the spread of disease in hospitals, most people at the time thought that dirty air caused sickness. While this was somewhat true, it led many doctors to believe that proper sanitation wasn't necessary for keeping their patients healthy. Hospitals at the time did not have stations for washing hands. Surgeons often operated in dirty, stained clothing and rarely cleaned their work stations.

Lister wondered what caused the “dirty air.” After reading a report by Louis Pasteur that said that food rotted because of microorganisms, he developed the germ theory of disease – the idea that tiny germs carried from person to person was what caused illness, not air itself.

Lister began spraying carbolic acid, an antiseptic solution, into the air during surgery to kill the germs. He encouraged his staff to wash their hands before surgery and clean their tools in between operations as well. Other doctors slowly began to realize that he was on to something, and by the 1870s, survival rates in hospitals increased dramatically.



It's tough to understand how easily germs can spread when you can't see them! Grab a few friends and try this activity to see how germs get around.

What You Need:

A few friends
Glitter

What You Do:

Pour a small pile of glitter into your hand. Rub your hands together like you're putting on lotion or washing your hands with it. You should end up with glitter smeared all over your hands. (Hint: you might want to do this over some newspaper so you don't make a mess!) Shake hands with a friend. Have that friend shake hands with another friend. Have that friend shake hands with a different friend, and so on.

By the end, you all should have glitter all of your hands! You might even have some on your face, arms and in your hair, too.

