Global Handwashing Day is held annually on 15 October and is dedicated to raising awareness on the importance of washing hands with soap as a key approach to disease prevention, and to mobilise schools, individuals, communities, households, hospitals, to this great cause.

The WRC, in collaboration with the National Department of Health and the City of Tshwane paid a visit to Onverwacht Primary School in Cullinan, City of Tshwane to promote good handwashing behaviour on 18 October, and took the learners through the process of handwashing.

This process is often taken for granted but it is not well understood. The Director General of the National Department of Health has been requested to dedicate the month of October to handwashing to ensure that promotion continues even beyond 15 October.

More recently, the national health department issued a warning following the recent outbreak of the food-borne disease Listeriosis in South Africa. Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi said a total of 557 cases had been detected this year alone and at least 36 people have died in the last 11 months. According to the National Department of Health South usually records 60-80 cases a year.

“"The bacteria is widely distributed in nature and can be found in soil, water and vegetation. Animal products and fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables can be contaminated from these sources," Motsoaledi said. Handwashing therefore is critical in preventing the transmission of such illness from one person to another.

In 2009, the WRC commissioned a study to develop a scientific method to assess the effectiveness of hand washing and hand hygiene behaviours. This research resulted in the development of a hand hygiene assessment framework. According to the WRC study, the manner in which individual washes their hands (hand hygiene technique) was an influenced by factors such as individual and environmental behaviours.

The WRC study shows that human hands are one of the chief vehicles of transmission of diarrhoeal disease. Good hand hygiene plays a significant role in preventing and minimising diseases. You can get germs on your hands when you touch objects. Once germs are on your hands, they can get inside your body through a wound or when you touch your eyes, nose or mouth. You can also spread germs on your hands to objects or people that you touch.

Five facts showing the importance of handwashing:

- It is estimated that washing hands with soap and water could reduce diarrhoeal disease-associated deaths by up to 50%.
- Researchers in London estimate that if everyone routinely washed their hands, a million deaths a year could be prevented.
- A large percentage of foodborne disease outbreaks are spread by contaminated hands. Handwashing can reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses and other
Handwashing can reduce the risk of respiratory infections by 16%.

In a study involving 16 primary schools and 6,000 students, the use of an alcohol hand sanitiser in the classroom provided an overall reduction in absenteeism due to infection by 20%.

Using recycled material, children can make their own hand washing devices, should they not have handwashing basins or running taps at home or school. Basic steps have been developed to teach children to construct their own handwashing device popularly known as the ‘Tippy Tap’ to ensure that hands are kept clean at all times.

Demonstration of a Tippy Tap use, a home-made handwashing device - Onverwacht at Primary School, City of Tshwane

Visit the Water Research Commission’s web page at www.wrc.org.za and get more tips and research on handwashing.