

# What Happens to Your Leftover Bar of Hotel Soap?

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The Global Soap Project estimates that the U.S. hotel industry throws away 2.6 million bars of soap daily
- › More than 1 million deaths could be prevented every year just by handwashing with soap
- › About 5,000 hotels have partnered with Clean the World to recycle the leftover soap products from their hotel rooms
- › Since 2009, Clean the World has sent 80 million bars of soap to 115 countries, saving an untold number of lives in return

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Washing your hands with soap and water is one of the simplest and most effective ways to prevent the spread of disease and reduce your risk of infectious illness. In the U.S. and other developed countries, it's easy to take a bar of soap for granted, but not everyone has ready access to this life-saving commodity.

This is particularly atrocious because in the U.S., where one-third of the world's soap is used, there are 4.6 million hotel rooms. And what comes with each of those hotel rooms?

At least one bar of soap. Most people do not use up the entire bar of soap during their hotel stay and simply leave the unused portion behind. Have you ever wondered what

happens to that leftover soap? It often gets thrown away. The Global Soap Project estimates that the U.S. hotel industry throws away 2.6 million bars of soap daily.<sup>1</sup>

It's an unspeakable waste but one that the charity Clean the World, which partners with the Global Soap Project, is making a dent in via their soap recycling program.

The recycling, which ends up costing hotels just 75 cents per room a month, allows leftover soap, body wash, shampoo and conditioner to be melted down, sterilized and formed into new soap that is sent all over the world.<sup>2</sup>

## **Soap Is a Lifesaver**

Lack of access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) contributes to two of the three leading causes of death in children aged 5 and younger in the developing world – pneumonia and diarrhea – both of which can be reduced with access to soap.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, a 2015 study found that washing hands with soap reduces the risk of pneumonia in children by nearly 50%.<sup>4</sup> Further, the Global Soap Project estimates that 1.7 million deaths could be prevented every year just by handwashing with soap. They explain:<sup>5</sup>

*"Handwashing with soap is the single most effective way to prevent those deaths. In fact, soap is more effective than vaccines, medications or clean water initiatives alone. Research has shown that soap can reduce diarrheal disease by nearly one-half and rates of respiratory infection by about one-quarter."*

Since 2009, Clean the World has sent 80 million bars of soap to 115 countries, saving an untold number of lives in return.<sup>6</sup> They're working to not only increase soap in schools around the globe, which could result in 1.9 billion school days gained, but also to provide soap to health care facilities and communities.

## **How the Hotel Soap Recycling Program Works**

About 5,000 hotels have partnered with Clean the World to recycle the leftover soap products from their hotel rooms.<sup>7</sup> As CNN reported:<sup>8</sup>

*"The recycling process is simple. Clean the World provides collection materials, training and packaging to a hotel's housekeeping staff. The staff then collects soap, shampoo, conditioner and body washes and ships it all to the charity's recycling centers."*

The organization has hotel partners in all 50 U.S. states and Canada, including major hotel chains, Bed & Breakfasts and timeshares. If you want to choose your lodging needs when traveling accordingly, you can view a list of Clean the World's hospitality industry recycling partners.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of this recycling program is striking. For example, Disney World's Port Orleans Resort in Orlando, Florida, has recycled 53,677 bottled amenities and 465,477 bars of soap as of 2019.<sup>10</sup> Clean the World also distributes hygiene kits to those in need in the U.S. and is planning to expand to China and the Middle East. In a 2017 CNN article, founder Shawn Seipler said:<sup>11</sup>

*"[W]e had \$20 million combined revenue and 70 global team members. We were in a garage eight years ago. That is a real testament to the hospitality industry and their commitment to making an impact."*

## **The Value of a Bar of Soap**

When you consider the many deadly diseases that can be prevented with a bar of soap, its value becomes priceless. Efforts are underway to spread awareness about the importance of using soap for the purpose of washing hands. The World Health Organization notes:<sup>12</sup>

*"Using proper toilets and hand washing – preferably with soap – prevents the transfer of bacteria, viruses and parasites found in human excreta which otherwise contaminate water resources, soil and food."*

*This contamination is a major cause of diarrhea, the second biggest killer of children in developing countries, and leads to other major diseases such as cholera, schistosomiasis and trachoma [the leading cause of preventable blindness worldwide]."*

Worldwide, the CDC also reports that washing hands with soap and water could cut deaths associated with diarrhea by 12% while reducing the risk of respiratory infections by 13%.<sup>13</sup>

Research published in The Lancet further placed "the potential number of diarrhea deaths that could be averted by handwashing at about a million (1.1 million; lower estimate 0.5 million; upper estimate 1.4 million)."<sup>14</sup>

When researchers looked specifically at the effect of promoting household handwashing with soap among children at the highest risk of death from diarrhea, they found that it led to a 53% lower incidence of diarrhea among children 15 years and under.<sup>15</sup>

Among infants, the handwashing promotion and soap led to 39% fewer days with diarrhea, and severely malnourished children also benefited, experiencing 42% fewer days with diarrhea.

## **Instilling the Importance of Handwashing in the US**

Perhaps surprisingly, in the U.S., where soap is generally not hard to come by, only 58% of people wash their hands after using the toilet.<sup>16</sup>

Further, even those who do may not be doing so correctly. In a study of more than 3,700 bathroom-goers in a college town, only 5% washed their hands properly, in a way that would kill infection and illness-causing germs.<sup>17</sup>

Among the rest, 33% didn't even use soap and 10% neglected to wash their hands at all after using the restroom. Others did not wash their hands long enough to be effective at removing germs.

There were some trends noted, too. Older generations typically washed their hands more frequently, and for longer, than younger generations, and women tended to wash their hands more often, and more effectively, than men.

Still, the study suggests that a lot of people – the majority – are receiving a false sense of security when they wash their hands, believing them to be clean when in fact they've done little to actually remove the germs. Even among health care workers, it's estimated that **proper handwashing** is carried out less than half of the time it should be.<sup>18</sup>

## How to Wash Your Hands Effectively

If you have regular access to soap, consider yourself lucky – and take a few moments to learn how to get the most from washing with it. To make sure you're actually removing the germs when you wash your hands, follow these guidelines:

1. Use warm, running water and a mild soap (avoid **antibacterial soap**).
2. Work up a good lather, all the way up to your wrists, scrubbing for at least 15 or 20 seconds (most people only wash for about 6 seconds).
3. Make sure you cover all surfaces, including the backs of your hands, wrists, between your fingers, and around and below your fingernails.
4. Rinse thoroughly under running water.
5. In public places, use a paper towel to open the door as a protection from germs that the handles may harbor.

Since your skin is one of your primary defenses against bacteria, resist the urge to become obsessive about washing your hands. If you wash them too harshly or too frequently, you can extract many of the protective oils in your skin, which can cause your skin to crack and potentially even bleed, which could invite infection. So how often should you wash your hands? Use commonsense, but for additional advice the CDC recommends:<sup>19</sup>

Before, during and after preparing food

Before eating food

Before and after treating a cut or wound

After using the toilet

After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing

After touching an animal, animal feed or animal waste

After touching garbage

After handling pet food or pet treats

After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet

Before and after caring for someone who is sick

If you're interested in helping Clean the World's soap recycling project, they will help you to organize a fundraiser or awareness campaign, as they don't accept soap donations from individuals or small groups. At the very least, check into participating lodging partners when you travel, so you'll know the bar of soap you leave behind will be put to good use instead of tossed in the trash.

## Sources and References

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