



## Schools here keep an eye on hand gels

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Let's face it, kids are gross.

They investigate the stuff they pick up off the ground by putting it in their mouths. They bypass the soap dispenser after a visit to a public toilet, and sneezing on each other practically is a sport. Then they go to lunch.

It's no surprise, then, that parents and teachers are fans of hand sanitizing gel. In San Antonio's elementary schools, kids with hands held out march past their teachers for a dollop of the alcohol-based gel on the way to the cafeteria.

The popular germ-killer has its critics, however, and recent reports of children getting sick from ingesting the gel have raised concerns about using it in place of old-fashioned soap and water.

A story making its way around the country via e-mail kicked off the concern. It involved a 4-year-old Oklahoma girl who reportedly got alcohol poisoning after licking hand-sanitizer gel off her hands.

In December, Parents magazine cautioned: "Be careful with hand gel," reporting an ounce of hand gel is equivalent to almost two shots of hard liquor and that it doesn't come in child-resistant containers.

While experts say children would have to ingest a lot of gel to get sick, some local schools are taking the warnings to heart — and taking precautions.

North East Independent School District began installing dispensers for antimicrobial, alcohol-free and hypoallergenic towelettes in elementary school classrooms last year. Most North East elementary schools already have the dispensers, which use a product called Kleenhanz.

Speedy Gonzales, North East's executive director for safe and healthy schools, said that eventually, Kleenhanz will be in all North East schools. He's asking teachers to leave the hand gel at home.

"As soon as we get Kleenhanz at every school, we're going to ban the gel," Gonzales said. "We want to be on the safe side. Especially for the really little ones, we have to protect them."

The majority of San Antonio schools don't have a problem with hand gel in the classroom. While most districts don't allow it to be on students' school supply lists anymore, it's still OK for teachers to bring the gel for students to use.

Charla Gray, district health coordinator for Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City ISD, said she hasn't heard any reports about kids having a reaction to the gel in her schools. She said school nurses and administrators at some SCUC schools supply hand sanitizer to classrooms and that staff are trained to monitor it.

"I strongly believe the benefits far outweigh any potential risks," Gray said. "We do emphasize good hand

washing with soap and water, but there are instances in the classroom when they can't immediately get to a sink. At times like that, hand sanitizer is a good substitute."

The Texas Poison Center Network agrees with Gray. On it's Web site, the network addresses the recent reports about hand gel, emphasizing that while hand sanitizers can be dangerous if swallowed, actual symptoms from their misuse are extremely rare.

"The bottom line is — hand sanitizers are beneficial for killing germs on hands and, like all potentially poisonous items, they should be stored out of the reach of children and should be used according to the label," according to the Web site. "Adults should monitor use of hand sanitizer by children to ensure the proper amount is used and that hands wet with sanitizer are not put in the mouth."

Shirley Schreiber, health services director for Northside ISD, said she's talking with the district's medical director about coming up with a policy on the use of hand gel. She has concerns beyond kids licking the gel.

"There has also been a lot of concern about antibacterial sanitizers destroying good bacteria that keeps us safe," she said.

Schreiber said the gels also could dry out skin if used too often.

"We have to look at both sides of it," she said. "We're not opposing it. I just want to make sure what we recommend is what's best for everyone."

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