

Healthy Living Practice 2: Washing clothes and bedding

Summary of research projects | December 2025



STARFISH is an Indigenous-led research program funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council to understand how Strep A bacteria spreads and how that spread can be reduced. We are looking into the role of Healthy Living Practice 2 (Washing clothes and bedding) to reduce the spread of Strep A and other causes of skin infections.

	Research project	Description	Outcomes and implications	Status
1	Mapping the growth of rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait community laundries in Australia	A scoping review of publicly available information to understand the number and distribution of community laundry facilities in rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.	Describes the recent growth of rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community laundries.	Accepted for publication in <i>Public Health Research and Practice</i> . Preprint available online .
2	Exploring barriers and enablers to household washing machine use in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities	A reflective article based on published information and a series of collaborative workshops which explores the challenges that people face with accessing functional washing machines in homes.	Understand the reasons for low household washing machine access and the rationale for community laundry services. Begin to identify strategies to support HLP2 at both household and community levels.	Workshops complete. Manuscript draft in progress. Preparing to submit to <i>Medical Humanities</i> .
3	Reviewing evidence for the spread of major skin pathogens and ectoparasites via fabrics, and methods for effective laundering	There are 7 major categories of interrelated skin pathogens (scabies, bed bugs, lice, fungal infections, Strep A bacteria, Staph bacteria, molluscum contagiosum virus). This review explores how different bugs survive on fabrics or how fabrics can be effectively decontaminated.	To provide a scientific foundation for the expected health benefits of HLP2, and for developing effective HLP2 guidance (6).	Manuscript under review. Preliminary results presented in conference posters. Strep A-specific short report under review.
4	Understanding the presence of Strep A on fabrics	Laboratory experiments to understand whether Strep A can be detected on different types of fabric, and the relevance of environmental factors such as temperature and humidity.	To confirm findings from the review (3b) and inform effective laundry guidance (6)	Preliminary lab-based work underway. Plans for extension in 2026.
5	Understanding the standards landscape for laundering in Australia	Document analysis of the Australian Standard for Laundry Practice [AS 4146:2024] and how relevant they are in the context of remote community laundries.	To understand more about standards that could apply to community laundry services.	Chapter-by-chapter analysis workshops complete. Analysis underway and manuscript draft in progress.
6	Guidance for effective HLP2 for i) general health and wellbeing, and ii) to manage skin infections	Based on findings from our skin pathogen/laundrying methods review (3) and informed by the standards landscape (5), we aim to provide guidance about washing practices that will be effective for different health and wellbeing outcomes.	To provide guidance about laundry specifications (i.e., water temperatures) for skin health.	Manuscript draft in progress, expected submission to a relevant journal early 2026.
7	'Yarning Quiet Ways About Washing'	Place-based yarns in the East Kimberley WA to understand the practices and preferences of local people relating to washing. Followed up by Participatory Action Research-informed workshops to develop ethical health promotion resources.	Privileging Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, and understanding the lived experiences of community members. To ensure local priorities are considered, and to understand how access to HLP2 can best be supported and sustained.	Ethics approved, first round of yarns completed August 2025, second round underway.
8	Health considerations for beds and mattresses	A review of a) evidence for the contamination of mattresses by priority skin pathogens and potential re-infection of washed bedding and b) publicly available information on programs addressing mattress and bedding availability in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.	Improve understanding of the broader home environment which influences the effectiveness of HLP2 and health outcomes. Document mattress and bedding programs as a means to facilitate synergistic planning.	Data collection underway and draft manuscript in progress.

Would you like to talk with us about any of these projects? Please email STARFISHProgram@thekids.org.au or A/Prof Rosemary Wyber (rosemary.wyber@thekids.org.au), Dr Rachel Burgess (rachel.burgess@thekids.org.au) or Dr Kate Summer (kate.summer@thekids.org.au). We also have a monthly 'drop-in' meeting where we discuss these projects and other HLP2 considerations. Please email us for more information.