



Routine cleaning is an important step to keep employees and customers healthy. Many businesses hire custodial companies to routinely clean their facilities; often employees choose to do additional cleaning. Here is how to ensure those efforts tackle dirt and germs safely and effectively.

Teach good handwashing habits - the #1 way to keep germs from spreading.

Use plain soap and water for handwashing – before eating, after using the bathroom, after coughing and sneezing, etc. Antibacterial soap is not recommended. Use plain fragrance-free soap. When there is no access to a sink with running water, alcohol-based (at least 60% alcohol, dye-free and fragrance-free) hand sanitizer or alcohol-based sanitizer wipes can be used. Hand sanitizers are not a substitute for handwashing, as they are not effective when hands are dirty or greasy. Disinfectant wipes should not be used to clean hands.

Cleaning for health benefits all

- Lowers absenteeism
- Increases productivity
- Improves indoor air quality
- Reduces asthma and allergy triggers

Good to know:

- Many common cleaning products have ingredients that can harm health, especially the lungs.

Know the difference between Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting.

Use the right product for the task:

- **CLEANING** removes dirt and most germs. Use soap and water. A third party certified green cleaner is preferred. **In conference or meeting rooms, cleaning is the focus.**
- **SANITIZING** reduces germs to safe levels, for example in food service environments. Food code regulations have specific requirements for sanitizers in the cafeteria and kitchen.
- **DISINFECTING** kills most germs, depending on the type of chemical, and only when used as directed on the label.

In businesses, custodial staff should use disinfectants and sanitizers regularly only in high-risk areas – bathrooms, cafeterias, kitchens, drinking fountains, sink and door handles, shared workstations; preferably, when employees are not present. Follow the disinfectant/sanitizer label directions; overuse does not provide any additional protection and can expose employees to harmful chemicals. Follow the label directions. If disinfecting is targeted against a microbe causing a specific illness (e.g. influenza, Norovirus, COVID-19, etc.) then use an EPA registered disinfectant that is certified as effective against that organism. The **Selected EPA - Registered Disinfectants** webpage list is located here: <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/selected-epa-registered-disinfectants#pathogens>.

Employees should rely on basic cleaning to remove dirt and germs in their areas.

Employees who want to clean their own areas should use a basic cleaner provided by the business. A third party certified green cleaner is preferred. Find **EPA Safer Choice Products** at: <https://www.epa.gov/saferchoice/products>.

- One option is to **make a simple all-purpose cleaner for employee use**. Mix one teaspoon of fragrance-free dish soap in a spray bottle filled with water. Spray on surface and scrub with paper towels or a microfiber cloth. Rinse and wipe dry to remove any residue.
- **Microfiber cleaning cloths improve cleaning** – the removal of dirt and germs. Dampened with water they are great dust removers. With soap and water, they remove most germs.
- **Disinfecting is the responsibility of custodial staff**. They are trained to use disinfectants in a safe and effective manner and to clean up potentially infectious materials and body fluid spills – blood, vomit, feces, and urine. Contact your custodian if employees are ill and your area needs cleaning and disinfection. If employees use disinfectants, the business must provide training and supply the appropriate product and protective equipment.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does cleaning reduce germs?

Cleaning works by removing dirt and organic matter that contains and protects germs. Soap breaks down oils and allows dirt, contaminants, and germs to be more easily removed. Cleaning with soap, water, and a microfiber cloth will remove most germs.

Should I do more cleaning during flu season or when there is increased illness at my business?

Implement enhanced cleaning/disinfecting and emphasize handwashing during illness events and flu season.

- Enhanced cleaning means daily (or more frequent) cleaning *then* disinfecting of hard surfaces (desks, tables, countertops, sinks) and other frequently touched surfaces, e.g., door handles, faucets, drinking fountains, railings. Include bathrooms, cafeterias, kitchens (microwaves, coffee pots), and areas where employees have become ill (if vomiting has occurred). Alcohol wipes can be used to clean computer keyboards, photocopiers, remotes, phones, etc.
- Focus on frequent handwashing, especially before eating, after using the restroom, before preparing food/snacks, after sneezing, coughing, blowing nose, etc.

Why is handwashing better than hand sanitizer?

Soap and rubbing hands together under running water removes oil, dirt, and harmful surface germs. Hand sanitizer does not remove dirt in which germs hide and may not kill all germs (like norovirus).

Why use plain soap for handwashing?

Antibacterial ingredients, in particular quaternary ammonia compounds (quats), only kill a few types of germs and are unnecessary when washing hands. It doesn't matter if germs are alive or dead when they are washed down the drain. Also, the chemicals used in antibacterial soaps are often later found to have adverse health effects and some have even been banned (e.g. Triclosan, an endocrine disruptor).

What about non-alcohol hand sanitizers?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention only recommends hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol. Non-alcohol ones are even less effective than alcohol hand sanitizers.

What are the issues with disinfecting wipes?

- Disinfecting wipes are often overused. They are not appropriate for general cleaning when an all-purpose cleaner or soap and water would suffice.
- Disinfecting wipes (e.g. Clorox, Lysol) usually contain quats and fragrance chemicals. These ingredients can trigger asthma and are associated with adverse health effects.
- Disinfectants can give a false sense of security because when they are not used exactly to label instructions, they don't work properly. Most disinfecting wipes require the surface to be cleaned first, and then remain visibly wet 4-10 minutes (dwell time) to be effective, requiring multiple wipes.

Why is it important to use fragrance-free products in a business?

Fragrance is one of the most frequently identified allergens, can irritate the respiratory system, cause headaches, and exacerbate asthma.

What's so great about microfiber cloths?

Their split fibers create more surface area and are superior for removing dust, dirt, and germs. They are reusable and can be laundered or washed by hand.

Why shouldn't employees bring common cleaning products (including bleach) from home into the business setting?

- Some common cleaning products are dangerous when mixed. Never mix bleach with ammonia, acids, or other disinfectants. An example: Comet, containing bleach, would react with Windex, which contains ammonia, to form poisonous vapors.
- Common household cleaners and disinfectants may not be appropriate for businesses and may cause allergic reactions or have other health impacts.
- Businesses must have a Safety Data Sheet for each chemical used, in addition to other requirements depending upon the chemical and its use.

Handout content adapted from *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* by WA State Department of Health and Spokane Regional Health District and used with permission.