

Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Restrooms

Cleaner and disinfectant choices and cleaning methods recommendations

When cleaning and disinfecting a public restroom, the what, how, and when of cleaning is important to providing a clean area that is safe for the public, employees, and the environment.

This factsheet applies to most public bathrooms in state offices and properties. Some facilities, like healthcare and daycare settings, have special rules or other regulations that may specify cleaning and disinfecting processes. See [Evaluation of Cleaners, Sanitizers, and Disinfectants for Surfaces \(PDF\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/risk/docs/guidance/cleaners.pdf) <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/risk/docs/guidance/cleaners.pdf> for more information.

Remember, handwashing is one of the most important steps everyone can take to protect health.

The difference between cleaning, sanitizing and disinfection

Clean does not have a smell¹

A clean, sanitary, and healthy room doesn't have a smell. Smelling the odor or added fragrance from a cleaning or disinfectant product does not guarantee that germs have been removed. In fact, overuse of sanitizers and disinfectants with strong odors from chemicals or fragrances contributes to poor indoor air quality and can result in respiratory problems for people who use the product or visit the location. Overuse of sanitizers and disinfectants might also result in germs that are resistant to these products.²



Cleaning

Cleaning means removing soil and germs from a surface like a floor or counter. To be effective, cleaning should be done with a general cleaner that will loosen germs and dirt from the surface, allowing equipment such as string mops or microfiber materials to pick up the dirt and germs. Cleaning equipment should be changed, washed, and dried between uses. In low touch areas of a public restroom, such as a common area floors, walls, or benches, cleaning may be all that is necessary to ensure that the area is safe for the general public and for employees, unless blood or body fluid has gotten on the surface.

Sanitizing and disinfection

Sanitizing and disinfection products reduce germs by killing them. These products do not remove dirt. Sanitizers are generally intended for areas that will be used for food service. In a public restroom, disinfectants are more likely to be used. Disinfectants need time in contact with germs to kill them, so

the surfaces being disinfected need to be kept wet with the product for a set amount of time, called “dwell time.” The instructions from the product manufacturer will tell you the amount of dwell time needed. You can usually find these instructions on the product’s original container. Disinfectants may not achieve germ reduction if the full dwell time is not allowed.

Best practice: General cleaning and spot disinfection

Generally speaking, public restroom surfaces should be cleaned with a general purpose cleaner, followed by targeted disinfection of certain surfaces. Cleaning should be done before disinfection. This removes surface dirt and gives disinfectants better opportunity to reach and kill germs.

Scientists have studied germs in public restrooms. They have found that germs that could infect people are mostly found in “high touch” areas.³ These are areas where people are mostly likely to touch surfaces as they use the restroom. Germs are left on these surfaces by people who are sick. People who are not sick could get the germs on their hands⁴ and become sick, too.

We recommend careful cleaning and spot disinfection on areas such as:

- toilet flush handles
- faucet handles
- countertops
- door handles, latches, panels and edges
- soap dispenser levers
- baby changing table

In addition, clean and disinfect toilet bowls, toilet seats, and areas around the toilet following the cleaner and disinfectant product instructions.

Other areas, such as mirrors, walls, and floors in lobby or common areas can be cleaned with a general cleaner or hot water and do not need disinfecting unless there has been blood or body fluid present.⁵

Keep in mind that using dirty cleaning equipment can spread germs or even *add* more germs to surfaces. It is important to rotate sections of the cleaning cloth, rinse cloths and mops often in clean water, or regularly change to a clean cloth or mop when cleaning.

These best practices balance human health considerations and environmental protection by the amount and type of disinfectant used.

Blood and body fluid clean up

For blood spill or body fluid (such as vomit), signs or other barriers will be needed to restrict access to the affected area until clean-up is complete. Most experts recommend that the person cleaning the spill should use waterproof gloves and eye protection or a face shield during the cleaning.⁵ Several pairs of gloves might be necessary. Absorbent materials, such as paper towels, kitty litter, or specialized product, will also be needed. Affected areas should be cleaned thoroughly first, and then disinfected.

A disinfectant with EPA approval for blood or infectious pathogens such as norovirus should be used, following the manufacturer’s instructions for dwell time. Access barriers should remain in place during that time.



After the dwell time has passed, wipe up the disinfectant. If needed, apply disinfectant to the area again. If a mop was used in cleaning, change the mop head and cleaning solution after cleaning is complete. Launder and dry the equipment. Always wash hands well after cleaning up a blood or body fluids.

Maintenance of cleaning equipment

Good quality microfiber cloths and mops can be very effective at picking up germs. If microfiber tools are used, follow the manufacturer instructions for cleaning them. In general, manufacturers recommend cleaning microfiber material separate and avoiding use of softeners. Softeners make the microfiber component of the material ineffective.^{6,7}

An adequate supply of cleaning materials, such as mop heads and cleaning cloths should be available. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends changing a mop head daily or after cleaning up blood or body fluids. Another recommendation is to allow the mop heads to dry between use.⁵ Always read and follow product labels carefully, and be sure to wear any recommended personal protective equipment.

Purchasing cleaning equipment, cleaners and disinfectants

When purchasing cleaners, disinfectants and cleaning equipment, State agency considerations may include the health of facility users and employees, limiting air and water pollution from toxic chemicals, budget and maintenance routines.

Purchase tips:

- Reusable, washable mops and cloths prevent waste and will probably save money as compared to disposable products.
- Be wary of combination “cleaner/disinfectant” products. Combined cleaner/disinfectants can be about three times the price of general cleaners when considering the amount of product used at proper dilution. In addition, because the disinfecting ability depends on an already-clean surface and proper dilution, users may use more of the product than needed for general cleaning and over disinfect areas that don’t need disinfection. Best practice is to use separate products - a general purpose cleaner for the whole restroom, and a disinfectant to spot disinfect the high touch areas.
- Generally, any EPA-registered disinfectant on the State contract (C-252(5)) is sufficient for general spot disinfection of public and office restrooms.
- All state agencies purchase goods and services from state contracts. Cleaning equipment, cleaners and disinfectants can be found on the contracts listed below in Table 1. Agency purchasers can help you access the contract details and price schedules via website of the [Office of State Procurement](http://www.mmd.admin.state.mn.us/) <http://www.mmd.admin.state.mn.us/>



Table 1 State contracts for cleaning and disinfecting products and supplies

Contract	Contract description
C-252(5) Cleaning supplies and floor care products	This contract is comprised of cleaning and disinfecting options that meet performance and environmental sustainability specifications
C-583(5) Cleaning supplies: miscellaneous	Includes brushes, brooms, floor machine pads, dust pans, toilet bowl brushes, plungers, mops, sponges, etc.
M-308(5) Janitorial maintenance equipment	Includes hard floor sweepers, scrubbers, etc.
W-200(5) Biohazard waste clean-up services	This contract is for biohazard waste clean-up services
T-572(5) Tools, industrial supplies, and equipment for maintenance, repair and operations	Includes gloves and other maintenance needs

References

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