COVID-19: Surface Cleaning and Disinfection Guidelines

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This WorkCare Fact Sheet discusses recommendations for cleaning and disinfecting surfaces in the workplace to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently updated some of its COVID-19-related workplace cleaning and disinfection recommendations. Certain types of facilities, such as health care delivery settings, remain subject to specific regulations and practices to reduce exposure risk.

When there are no confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases in a workplace, public health officials have determined that cleaning once a day is usually sufficient to remove infectious particles that may be on surfaces. In a science brief on surface transmission in indoor environments (updated April 5, 2021), researchers say it is possible for people to be infected through contact with contaminated surfaces or objects (fomites), but the relative risk of fomite transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, is considered low in comparison to direct contact, droplet or airborne transmission.

According to the CDC, employers may want to clean more frequently than once a day or choose to disinfect (in addition to cleaning) in shared spaces when the following conditions increase the risk of infection from touching surfaces:

- High transmission of COVID-19 in your community
- Low number of people wearing masks
- Infrequent hand hygiene
- Facility occupied by certain vulnerable populations

Employers are advised to clean and disinfect a facility when there has been a sick person or someone who tested positive for COVID-19 present within the last 24 hours.

Certain high-touch surfaces should be cleaned at least once a day. Examples include pens and pencils, cooking utensils, countertops, shopping carts, tables, doorknobs, light switches, handles, stair rails, elevator buttons, desks, keyboards, phones, toilets, faucets and sinks. Toys and other objects handled by children should be frequently cleaned.

Routine cleaning and disinfection is always advisable for health and safety reasons. During the pandemic, other exposure prevention measures such as wearing a mask, regularly washing hands, using hand sanitizer, maintaining social distance and getting vaccinated continue to be strongly recommended.

Products to Use

Both cleaning (soap or detergent) and disinfection (a product or process designed to inactivate SARS-CoV-2) can reduce the risk of fomite transmission. Cleaning reduces the amount of soil (e.g., dirt, microbes and other organic agents, and chemicals) on surfaces. Efficacy varies by the type of cleaner and how well the cleaning is performed, experts say. Surfactants in cleaners can be expected to disrupt and damage the membrane of an "enveloped" virus like SARS-CoV-2. Genetic material in the virus is contained within an envelope, or outer layer, of proteins and lipids.

To eliminate infectious particles, a contaminated surface must be treated with a disinfectant product registered with the Environmental Protection Agency (List N). Disinfectant products may also contain cleaning agents to remove soil and inactivate microbes. Technology that has been shown to be effective for disinfection, such as ultraviolet radiation, may also be used, however, effectiveness against SARS-CoV-2 has not been fully established.

It's important to follow manufacturers' guidelines when using products for cleaning and disinfecting. Some types of disinfection applications, particularly those with fogging or misting properties, are neither safe nor effective for inactivating the virus unless properly used, studies show. In addition, precautions should be taken to ensure adequate ventilation while cleaning and disinfecting. Gloves and other personal protective equipment should be worn, as recommended.

In summary, following practices and regulations specific to your type of facility for cleaning and disinfection is recommended. For detailed recommendations and links to resources, refer to the CDC's webpage on Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility.