Frequently Asked Questions

Cleaning and Disinfection for Schools

Cleaning and disinfecting are part of a broad approach to preventing the spread of illness and infectious diseases. Most important are handwashing, staying home when sick and properly covering coughs and sneezes. While disinfectants have their place in infection control, they should be used with discretion following proper procedures.

What is the difference between cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting?

Cleaning removes germs, dirt, and impurities from surfaces or objects. Cleaning works by using soap (or detergent) and water to physically remove germs from surfaces. This process does not kill germs, but by removing them, it lowers their numbers and the risk of spreading infection. *Cleaning will always contribute to the health of occupants because allergens and microorganisms are being physically removed from the surfaces, simply by cleaning properly.*

Sanitizing means to ***reduce*** *the number of microorganisms* on surfaces to a safe level but does not remove viruses and molds. A sanitizer may or may not destroy pathogenic or disease-causing bacteria (a criterion for disinfectant).

Disinfecting kills germs or pathogens (e.g. bacteria, viruses) on surfaces. The types of germs killed depends on the product. Disinfection works by using chemicals that contain antimicrobial pesticides. This process does not necessarily clean dirty surfaces or remove germs, but further lowers the risk of spreading infection by killing germs on a surface after prior cleaning. Disinfection is normally reserved for high touch surfaces such as taps, doorknobs, toys or surfaces that have been contaminated with blood or body fluids.

What are the concerns surrounding disinfectants?

The chemicals in some disinfectants can trigger asthma, allergies and other health concerns. Disinfectants are regulated by Health Canada and designed to kill microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses. Although regulated, these ingredients may not have been sufficiently tested for health risks to children and can cause harm if not used appropriately. Overuse of disinfectants can also lead to "superbugs" or bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics making it harder to kill these germs in the future.

Some types of disinfectants such as those that contain quaternary ammonium compounds can leave a biofilm on surfaces which may contribute to the development of superbugs. Disinfectants are also costly and require additional training to use properly.

What cleaning and disinfectant products are approved for use in our schools?

Only approved MHPSD cleaning and disinfection products should be used in schools and MHPSD worksites. These products have been properly evaluated for effectiveness, health, safety and environmental impact.

Household disinfectant wipes (e.g. Lysol, Clorox etc.) available at retail outlets *should not* be used in classrooms or used at MHPSD sites.

The cleaning and disinfection products approved by MHPSD are fragrance free, low toxicity, require shorter contact times and recognized for reduced environmental impact. These products use accelerated hydrogen peroxide as the active ingredient. These products do not leave a biofilm and are also effective in removing them. Rinsing is only required on food contact surfaces or potentially mouthed objects.

MHPSD approved cleaner/disinfectants for use by staff must be dispensed by custodians. This is to ensure the appropriate products are used and in the correct dilutions; and that staff have the proper training to ensure safe and effective use. Schools may also choose to order MHPSD approved disinfecting wipes at their cost.

When is it appropriate to use a disinfectant?

Custodians are expected to follow standard procedures for *routine cleaning and disinfecting*. This means daily disinfection of multiple high touch surfaces such as bathroom fixtures, doorknobs, taps, light switches, and drinking fountains. Desks are disinfected weekly. This frequency may change if there is an illness outbreak, pandemic or there are special requirements for students with medical conditions.

Cleaning and disinfection of office and school curriculum related items such as gym mats, computer keyboards, hands-on learning items and toys, eye protection, headphones etc. is not done by custodians. MHPSD approved ready to use disinfecting solutions can be dispensed by custodians for cleaning and disinfection of these items.

Staff should review this FAQ and the attached Appendices – General Guidelines and Procedure for Disinfection of Hard Surfaces prior to use of any disinfectant wipe or solution.

What is the proper way to use a disinfectant?

Always follow label directions for any cleaner, sanitizer or disinfectant. Disinfection requires a two-step process using a specified contact time. **Clean the area first then apply disinfectant and let sit to air dry for the required contact time.** Refer to *Appendices 1 and 2* at the end of this document.

It is important to remember that before disinfection can occur, the surface must be cleaned of soil, otherwise the disinfection product will not be fully effective. Disinfection requires the product to remain wet on the surface for the contact time specified by the product label. MHPSD approved products require a 1 – 5 minute contact time while retail products such as Lysol typically require more product, longer contact times and rinsing for the same effect.

What training is required for use of cleaners and disinfectants?

All staff periodically using MHPSD approved cleaning and disinfecting products should complete the WHMIS awareness training available on Hour Zero.

When is it appropriate to use a disinfectant wipe?

When convenience is required, use MHPSD approved disinfecting wipes to clean and disinfect small items or *small surface areas* that are touched often, such as change tables, phones and computers, toys or a small amount of blood spilled onto a surface. Pay close attention to the directions for using disinfecting wipes and how much surface area one wipe will effectively disinfect. The standard disinfecting wipe approved by MHPSD will disinfect a 5’ x 4’ (20 ft^2) surface.

One side of the wipe can be used to clean the surface first and the other side of the wipe used to disinfect. It may be necessary to use more than one wipe to keep the surface wet for the required contact time listed on the label.

A less costly alternative to wipes is to use the MHPSD approved cleaner/disinfectant in a spray bottle that can be provided by the custodian.

What level of cleaning and disinfection is required during pandemic and illness outbreaks?

During illness outbreaks it is not normally necessary or recommended to close schools or to clean and disinfect every surface in the building. Most studies have shown that most viruses can live and potentially infect a person for up to 48 hours after being deposited on a surface. Most viruses are relatively fragile, so standard cleaning practices especially when a microfiber cloth is used are often enough to remove them.

Changes in cleaning and disinfection frequency and locations are initiated in consultation with Alberta Health Services, Facilities Department and the Health and Safety Officer. During illness outbreaks refer to the Pandemic Resources and Training modules in Hour Zero. Specific Enhanced Cleaning Protocols are in effect for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keep in mind that overuse of some cleaners and disinfectants can irritate eyes, noses, throats, and skin; aggravate asthma; and cause other serious side effects. MHPSD approved products are selected to eliminate or reduce these hazards.

What alternatives are there to the use of disinfectants?

When disinfection of high touch surfaces is not required, a MHPSD approved multipurpose neutral cleaner with use of disposable or microfiber cloths can help reduce bacteria and viruses on hard surfaces.

Should antibacterial soap be used for hand washing?

Antibacterial soaps, such as those containing triclosan, are no more effective at killing germs than regular soap. Overuse of products containing these ingredients can lead to "superbugs" or bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics making it harder to kill these germs in the future.

Resources

- Guidance for School Administrators to Help Reduce the Spread of Seasonal Influenza in K-12 Schools
- CDC Guidelines for School Cleaning/Disinfection
- Healthy Schools Network – Disinfecting Wipes

Appendix 1

Disinfecting Hard Surfaces using MHPSD approved Products

General Guidelines

- Determine whether you need to clean, sanitize or disinfect. In most cases regular cleaning using a clean microfiber cloth or paper towel will physically remove germs and prevent them from growing and spreading.

- Except during pandemic and illness outbreaks, limit use of disinfectants to high touch surfaces or surfaces contaminated with blood or body fluids. Desks are cleaned daily and cleaned/disinfected weekly by custodial staff and do not need to be disinfected daily unless there is a pandemic/illness outbreak or there are special circumstances such as students with medical conditions.

- Use only MHPSD approved cleaning and disinfecting products. Contact the Facilities Department or the Health and Safety Officer for information on approved products.

- For convenience, ready to use disinfecting wipes are available through the Facilities Department at the schools' cost. Use disinfecting wipes on ***small surfaces*** that are touched often, such as phones and keyboards. **Do not use the same wipe on multiple surfaces.**

- For ***larger surfaces*** and surfaces that require frequent daily cleaning/disinfection (e.g. change tables, mats etc.) use of a pre-mixed disinfecting solution is less costly. MHPSD approved product can be dispensed into a spray bottle by the custodian.

- Any use of disinfectants on food preparation surfaces or mouthed objects require an additional water rinse.

- All products dispensed into spray bottles must have the appropriate label. Do not mix cleaners and disinfectants. Combining certain products can result in serious injury. Spray bottles should be cleaned and rinsed frequently.

- Prepare disinfectant solutions fresh and use according to the ***shelf life*** specified. It is important that proper dilution strengths of disinfectant solutions are used. This is accomplished using dilution control dispensing system in the custodial rooms.

- Staff using MHPSD approved cleaners and disinfectants must receive general orientation on proper use of the product which includes completing WHMIS awareness training, reading this guideline and reading the product label and safety data sheet.
- Do not use disinfectants on skin and immediately wash your hands after use.

Procedure for Disinfection of Hard Surfaces

Step 1- **Clean:**

Prior to disinfection, *clean* the surface using a clean cloth or disposable towel wetted with soap and water, or an MHPSD approved neutral cleaner.

Visibly soiled surfaces must be clean *before* applying the disinfectant.

Wipe the surface firmly and thoroughly (creating friction) with a wet cloth (preferably microfiber). This step may need to be repeated if there is a lot of visible soil such as vomit or feces.

Note: If using an MHPSD approved wipe use one surface of the wipe for cleaning then flip over and use the other side to complete the disinfection process.

Step 2- Disinfect:

Once the surface is clean of soil, apply the disinfectant to visibly wet the entire surface. Avoid misting products onto the surface as this can increase personal exposure to the chemical (adjust the spray bottle as necessary or apply directly to cloth first)

Step 3- **Contact Time**:

Allow the disinfectant to **sit wet** on the surface for the required **contact time** indicated on the product label instructions. For MHPSD approved products this is between 1- 5 minutes.

Step 4- **Air dry**

Allow to air dry. Although air drying of disinfected surfaces is preferable, should surfaces still be wet after the appropriate contact time, the surface may be wiped dry with a clean cloth or disposable towel. (Note: water rinse is required on food contact surfaces and mouthed objects)