

THE TERMS: DEFINED

Cleaning vs. Sanitizing vs. Disinfecting of Surfaces



Cleaning Coalition
of America

The first step when developing an enhanced cleaning regimen is to conduct a facility risk assessment to identify when and where to clean, sanitize, and disinfect. Understanding the differences between each cleaning technique – and how to deploy them properly – can help reduce the spread of harmful pathogens on fomites, and ultimately keep facilities clean and safe.



CLEANING

WHAT

Cleaning removes dirt, organic matter, and other impurities from surfaces and objects. This process does not kill germs, but rather ensures that germs are not hidden from the disinfectant when applied.

WHEN

Cleaning is the first step, before disinfecting, in an enhanced cleaning regimen.

WHERE

All surfaces – especially high-touch surfaces (for example: door knobs, elevator buttons, water coolers, etc.) – must be thoroughly cleaned.

HOW

Cleaning is done by applying friction with a microfiber cloth to surfaces and using soap (or detergent) and water to physically remove germs, biomass, and inorganic material. This process is important so that remaining germs are not hidden from the disinfectant when applied.



SANITIZING

WHAT

Sanitizing reduces the number and growth of bacteria, viruses, and fungi to a safe level as identified by a public health standard.

WHEN

Sanitizing will occur in accordance with the standards set for the environment. For example, in a restaurant, a dishwasher may be required to sanitize every plate after it has been used.

WHERE

All surfaces can be sanitized depending on the need and level required. The technique is most commonly used in food service areas or in environments with cracks and crevices where transient and pathogenic flora can thrive.

HOW

The exact application and products used to sanitize will depend on the environment and the standards followed. Facility managers should speak with their commercial janitorial services partner to determine how to sanitize their facility.



DISINFECTING

WHAT

Disinfecting is the logarithmic reduction in microorganisms as verified by laboratory testing. Disinfecting kills 99.999% of germs on surfaces and objects, including invisible microorganisms. There are three levels of disinfection: High, Intermediate, and Low. Low and intermediate level disinfection can be performed by a facility service manager, but high-level disinfection cannot because it is not safe for human application.

High

According to the CDC, High-level disinfectants (HLDs) are used in healthcare facilities to chemically disinfect reusable, medical, and dental devices to prevent healthcare-associated infections among patients.¹ High-level disinfection is a sterilant used for a shorter contact time to achieve a 99.9999% kill of pathogens that cause serious disease.²

Intermediate

Intermediate-level disinfection refers to the use of an agent that kills a wider range of pathogens than a low-level disinfectant but does not kill bacterial spores. EPA-registered hospital disinfectants that are certified to kill *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, as well as less resistant microorganisms, are intermediate-level disinfectants.³

Low

Low-level disinfection refers to the use of an agent that destroys all vegetative bacteria (except tubercle bacilli) and destroys most viruses – including hepatitis B virus (HBV), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). These agents are not effective against bacterial spores.⁴

WHEN

Disinfecting occurs after the cleaning process (some products may clean and disinfect at the same time). The frequency of disinfection required for environmental surfaces is determined during a facility risk assessment.

WHERE

All contact surfaces – especially high-touch surfaces – should be disinfected on a regular basis to prevent the spread of illnesses. Priority surfaces include but are not limited to doorknobs, light switches, elevator buttons, stair rails, soap and paper towel dispensers, and restroom fixtures.

HOW

Disinfecting works by using EPA-registered chemicals that have been verified by laboratory testing to kill germs on surfaces and objects.

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/healthcarehsp/disinfect.html>

2. <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/guidelines/disinfection/rational-approach.html#:~:text=The%20FDA%20definition%20of%20high,to%20prevent%20transmission%20of%20infection.>

3. https://apps.hhs.texas.gov/providers/NF/credentialing/cna/infection-control/module5/Module_5_Cleaning_and_Disinfecting10.html#:~:text=Intermediate%20level%20disinfection%20refers%20to,to,claim%20are%20intermediate%20level%20disinfectants.

4. https://apps.hhs.texas.gov/providers/NF/credentialing/cna/infection-control/module5/Module_5_Cleaning_and_Disinfecting9.html#:~:text=Low%20level%20disinfection%20refers%20to,not%20effective%20against%20bacterial%20spores.