

Facility Care

Ask the Expert Column
Waterless Hand Cleansers

What are waterless instant hand antiseptic cleansers and when should they be used?

By Amy Walker Barrs

Waterless instant hand antiseptic cleansers are alcohol-based cleansers that do not require water and do not require hand drying with a towel. They usually contain 60 to 65 percent ethyl alcohol. They are available as alcohol rinses, alcohol gels and alcohol foams. All provide broad-spectrum, fast-acting, persistent activity designed to significantly remove or destroy microorganisms on intact skin. The American Association for Professionals in Infection Control's (APIC) Guidelines for Infection Control Practice state that alcohol-based cleansers are generally effective against most gram positive and negative microorganisms and provide good activity against tubercle bacillus. The APIC Guidelines also state that though alcohols are not sporicidal, they may act against many fungi and viruses, including hepatitis B virus and HIV.

Alcohol applied to the skin is among the safest and most effective of known antiseptics. While alcohol-based products are commonly used for surgical scrubbing in Europe, they have been less widely accepted in the United States. One reason may be concerns about dryness or more serious skin damage, such as contact dermatitis. However, while traditional alcohol-based hand sanitizers may cause dryness or do little to relieve the stress on skin from soap and water hand washing, new alcohol-based products with moisturizers and emollients can actually condition and soften skin while killing 99.9 percent of germs in as little as 15 seconds.

In fact, a study of skin irritation and dryness associated with alcohol hand gels vs. standard soap and water hand washing found that those nurses who

cleaned with alcohol gels did not experience dryness in their hands but actually showed a slight improvement. Presenting this information at the 1999 Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA) conference, Dr. John Boyce, a hospital epidemiologist at the Miriam Hospital in Providence, RI, said “this small study suggests that alcohol gel regimens that contain emollients actually do not result in more irritation and dryness, and may be tolerated better than a lot of the soaps and detergents.”

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are recommended as a supplement to regular hand washing when soap and water are not readily available. These cleansers are not recommended by APIC for use when hands are soiled with dirt and/or organic material, including blood.

When using alcohol-based cleansers it's important to make sure that all surfaces of the hands are wet. The alcohol must be allowed to thoroughly evaporate from the skin for it to be fully effective. If hands are soiled and sinks are not available, detergent-containing towelettes should be used first to cleanse the hands. After this, the alcohol-based cleanser can be used to achieve hand antisepsis.

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