

Health & Hygiene:

Germ Defense in the Workplace



In health care facilities, infection control is everyone's job, because germ transmission can happen anywhere. From lobby and waiting areas, to corridors, offices and patient care areas, there are numerous opportunities for patients, employees and visitors to pick up or pass along germs. While infection control and environmental services personnel will be your facility's official authority on hygiene and cleanliness, there are several things that all health care personnel can and should know about preventing the spread of germs and creating a cleaner, more hygienic facility for patients, employees and visitors.

Respiratory Etiquette

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that "implementation of 'respiratory etiquette' practices can decrease the risk of transmission . . . and control the spread of . . . common respiratory pathogens." Implementing the new CDC Respiratory Etiquette Recommendations involves both infection control specialists and general health care workers. Here are the basics you need to know:

- **Post visual alerts** (in appropriate languages) at the entrance to outpatient facilities, instructing patients and people accompanying them to inform health care personnel of symptoms of a respiratory infection when they first register for care.
- Instruct patients to cover their nose/mouth when sneezing/coughing. **Provide ample supply of facial tissue** for patients and instruct them to dispose of used facial tissue in an appropriate (touch-free) waste receptacle.
- Instruct patients to perform (and provide means and supplies for performing) **appropriate hand hygiene** (handwashing with non-antimicrobial soap and water, alcohol-based hand rub, or antiseptic handwash) after having contact with

respiratory secretions and contaminated objects. The CDC recommends disposable paper towels for drying washed hands.

- **Provide masks** (either procedure masks with earloops or surgical masks with ties) to patients who are coughing. Encourage coughing patients to sit at least three feet away from others in common waiting areas.

Advise health care personnel to **observe Droplet Precautions** (ie, wearing a surgical or procedure mask for close contact) in addition to Standard Precautions, when examining a patient with symptoms of a respiratory infection, particularly if fever is present.

No-Touch Restrooms

Nothing says “unhygienic” more than a dirty restroom. Whether it’s from paper litter on the floor, noxious odors, or lackadaisical cleaning, dirty restrooms topped the list of worker complaints in a recent survey. A couple of quick tips to keep germs at bay in your facility...

- **Identify “hot zones” for germ transmission.** The toilet, the floor surrounding the toilet, the sink and counter, and high-touch objects such as handles and levers (found everywhere from water faucets and paper towel dispensers to the door you open on the way out of the restroom) can all harbor germs just waiting for the next pair of clean and unsuspecting hands to pick them up. In fact, according to one of the seminal studies on microorganisms in public restrooms, the hot water tap is more likely to harbor germs than the toilet seat!
- **Stop germ transmission in its tracks by employing no-touch systems.** No-touch technology can be employed in toilet flushers, water faucets, and dispensers for toilet paper, soap and hand towels. No-touch technology is especially crucial for hand towel dispensers, since towels are typically used once hands are clean, after having been washed and rinsed. That is the most important time for people not to touch potentially germ-laden surfaces.

Look for towel and tissue dispensing systems with “interleaved” paper, so users only need to touch the towel or toilet paper they use without fishing around inside the dispenser, thus reducing the risks of cross-contamination. Or look for completely “touchless” roll towel dispensers that don’t have levers or cranks.

Hand Hygiene

Every health care professional should be aware that the CDC calls **clean hands the most important actor in preventing the spread of germs**. Educate *all employees* (even those without direct patient contact) on the importance of proper handwashing. Post reminders in restrooms for employees and visitors alike. Make sure there’s always plenty of mild hand soap and soft, absorbent hand towels in every public and employee restroom, in addition to patient restrooms. Nothing is more disconcerting to people who want to “do the right thing” by washing up, only to find no handwashing supplies. If supply run-out is a problem, consider a highcapacity dispenser and remember – high-capacity doesn’t need to mean industrial. Find a highvolume dispenser that lends a little class to your restrooms.

Ever since the CDC released its new Guidelines for Hand Hygiene in Healthcare Settings, significant attention has been paid to the Guideline’s recommendations for using alcohol-based handrubs to protect patients. The CDC maintains that since clean hands are the single most important factor in preventing the spread of dangerous germs and antibiotic resistance in health care settings, that **more widespread use of alcohol-based handrubs** (which improve adherence to recommended hand hygiene practices) **will promote patient safety and prevent infections**. In fact, studies have shown a drop in patient infection rates when hand hygiene frequency is increased.

According to data and studies referenced in the Guideline, healthcare personnel may be more inclined to use alcohol-based handrubs containing emollients because they are more convenient

to use. They are **more accessible** than sinks, take **less time to use** and cause **less skin irritation** and dryness than any soaps. Moreover, these handrubs are more effective for standard handwashing than soap.

The CDC Guideline recommends steps health care facility administrators can take to **increase adherence to good hand hygiene practices**. One suggestion is for purchasers and administrators to consult with health care personnel on issues like the product's smell, consistency and the amount of skin irritation the product may cause.

Keep in mind, that while the CDC Guidelines allow the use of alcohol-based handrubs in certain cases, OSHA has stated that employers still must ensure that workers wash their hands with soap and running water if they are exposed to blood or potentially infectious material.

Surface Sanitation

In addition to the restroom, “**germ hot zones**” are everywhere. Door handles, stair rails, elevator buttons, and ATM machines are just a few examples of surfaces that are touched hundreds or thousands of times a day in a typical healthcare facility. That's why proper surface sanitation is crucial in the fight against germ transmission. If you choose a surface sanitizing system that's portable and easy to carry, it will make spotcleaning of these hot zone spots much easier.

Don't forget employee break rooms. This can be an ideal spot for the spread of germs, including foodborne illness germs. Providing hand- and surface-sanitizing products right in the break room can help avoid the spread of germs. Disposable surface sanitizer wipes come in canisters that can be stored under a sink or right on a countertop for employees to wipe down food contact surfaces. If the break room doesn't have a sink, install alcohol gel hand sanitizers. If it does have a sink, post handwashing reminders so employees wash up before they eat.