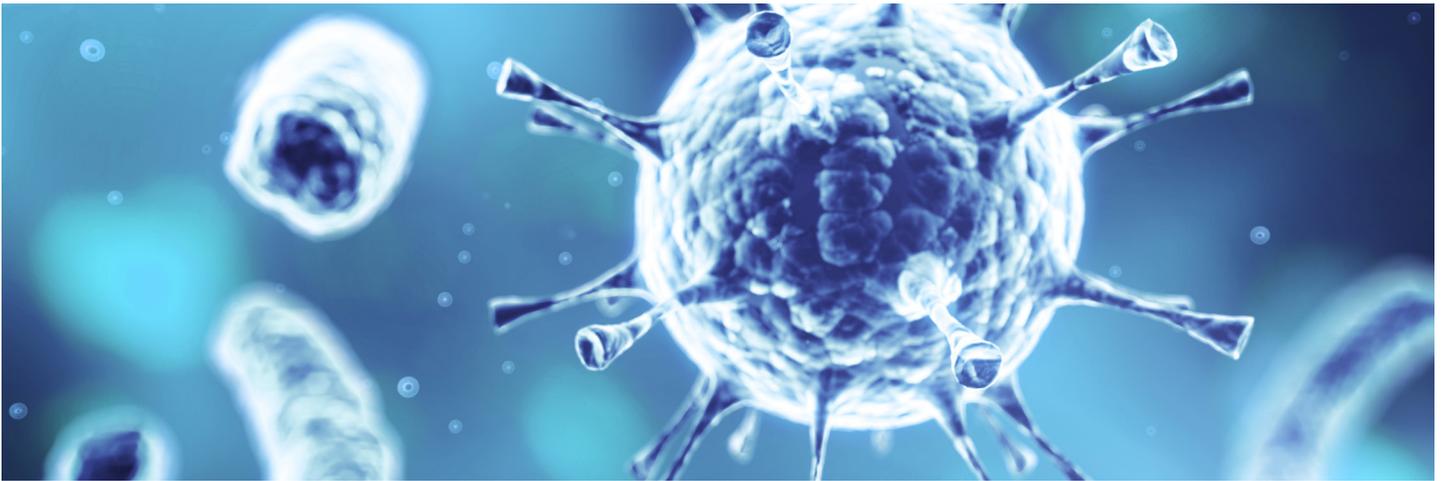


Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting – Understanding the Differences



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INTRODUCTION

When the words “cleaning,” “sanitizing,” and “disinfecting” are used interchangeably, it creates confusion. These terms have very specific meanings and are critical to compliance in restaurants, grocery stores, convenience stores, and other foodservice facilities. Knowing – and understanding – each can help you effectively manage surfaces in food establishments.

CLEANING

The Food and Drug Administration Food Code requires that all food-contact surfaces must be cleaned prior to the sanitizing step.¹ Cleaning a surface of significant food soil is necessary before effective sanitization or disinfection can occur.

Organic material present on a dirty surface can interfere with the effectiveness of antimicrobial products, either by forming a protective barrier to the microorganisms or by interfering with the antimicrobial chemistry itself.

If a sanitizer or disinfectant is not a one-step product, then a cleaning step is always required for product efficacy, and the label will note surfaces should be clean prior to application.

Make sure to choose a cleaner that is effective for the soils likely encountered in your establishment. Incorporate mechanical agitation during the cleaning step using a brush, cloth, towel, or other appropriate tool to help lift trapped and stubborn organic material and soil away from the surface.

SANITIZING

The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines a sanitizer as “a substance, or mixture of substances, that reduces the bacterial population in the inanimate environment by significant numbers, (e.g., 3 log₁₀ reduction for non-food-contact sanitizers, and 5 log₁₀ reduction for food-contact sanitizers) or more, but does not destroy or eliminate all bacteria.”²

Sanitizers are not intended to destroy all bacteria. They reduce bacteria to levels considered safe.

According to the EPA, sanitizers are allowed to carry antibacterial claims but not claims for other classes of organisms, such as viruses and fungi.

Choose a sanitizer approved by the EPA for use on food-contact surfaces.

When used according to label instructions, food-contact approved products generally do not require a rinse step after application due to low safety risk if food were to encounter any residue left by the product after it dries.

Review sanitizer labels to ensure the appropriate time is allotted to effectively kill the organisms of most concern.



DISINFECTING

The EPA defines a disinfectant as “a substance, or mixture of substances, that destroys or irreversibly inactivates bacteria, fungi and viruses, but not necessarily bacterial spores, in the inanimate environment.”³

Disinfectants are stronger than sanitizers in that they are intended to have a higher level of antimicrobial efficacy and generally have a broader spectrum of activity.

The EPA allows disinfectants to make claims against classes of organisms other than bacteria, such as viruses and fungi.

The majority of disinfectants available require a rinse step with potable water when used on food-contact surfaces.

Their formulations at disinfectant levels may leave potentially harmful residues.

Recently, innovative disinfectant chemistries that do not require a rinse step when used on food-contact surfaces have become available. These chemistries utilize active ingredients (such as ethanol) that do not have an upper threshold for safety tolerance per 40 CFR § 180.

Check disinfectant labels to confirm whether a rinse step is required or if the product is deemed minimal risk on food-contact surfaces by the EPA.



When it comes to eliminating germs on surfaces, understanding the differences between products can help you provide a clean, welcoming environment for guests, customers, and employees.

To find the best combination of products, remember to:

- 1 Read and understand what's on the EPA-approved product label**
Safety warnings, efficacy levels, and usage instructions will tell you if the product meets your needs
- 2 Look for products with broad-spectrum efficacy and fast kill times**
Not all sanitizers are created equal, so make sure you're maximizing your investment
- 3 Know where the products are being used**
Now that you know the differences, make sure you are using the right product for the job
- 4 Firmly establish cleaning and sanitation practices**
Even the most effective products can't help if staff members aren't properly trained on using the products