

CLEANING, SANITIZING, AND DISINFECTING

When it comes to cleanliness, the terms clean, sanitize, and disinfect are used frequently, and oftentimes interchangeably. But what specifically does each mean? How do they differ from each other? And in what circumstances should each be used?

❖ CLEANING

Cleaning means to remove visible dirt, debris, oils, and/or dust from a surface. It can also include removing germs (viruses and/or bacteria) from a surface, though it does not necessarily kill them. This is done using soap or detergent, water, and friction to physically remove germs along with substances that allow these germs to survive and reproduce.

Cleaning is suitable for areas or objects that do not pose significant risks of passing on infectious agents, as well as porous surfaces such as carpeting, since chemical sanitizers and disinfectants do not work on these surfaces. Always clean dirty surfaces before using a sanitizer or disinfectant, since dirty surfaces reduce the effectiveness.



❖ SANITIZING

Sanitizing means to free something from dirt and germs. It lowers the number of germs on surfaces or objects to a safe level by killing or removing them. This is done using chemical-based products labeled as sanitizers (such as hand sanitizer) or by using disinfectants that have been diluted past the point of disinfection. For example, concentrated bleach can be a disinfectant, but diluted bleach can be a sanitizer. Sanitizing is stronger than cleaning, but not as strong as disinfecting. The EPA defines sanitizers as chemical products that can kill at least 99.9% of germs on hard surfaces. Sanitizers should be used when germs need to be eliminated but it would be excessive or dangerous to use a disinfectant, such as surfaces used for food preparation or on bare skin.

❖ DISINFECTING

Disinfecting means to cleanse of infection. It kills virtually all germs on hard, non-porous surfaces or objects, though it does not necessarily clean the surface or remove the germs. This is done with a chemical disinfectant or non-chemical means such as steam (which can also be effective on porous surfaces). It is the strongest form of cleaning, as it kills more germs than sanitizing does. The EPA defines disinfectants as chemical products that can kill at least 99.99% of germs on hard, non-porous surfaces or objects.

Disinfectants should only be used on high-touch, hard, non-porous surfaces. They should NEVER be used on hands or bare skin, on surfaces used for food preparation, or objects that go in the mouth.

Before using any cleaning product, fully read the instructions for use and follow all guidelines (appropriate surface type(s), length of application time, simultaneous use with other chemicals, dilution, etc.) Only use EPA Healthy Schools Act listed products approved by your district with proper PPE and in well-ventilated areas.